VIDEOGAME CULTURE

FEBRUARY 2006 £4

# EDGE®

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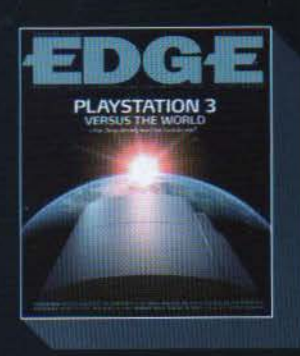
# PLAYSTATION 3
## VERSUS THE WORLD

Has Sony already won the console war?




**PREVIEWED** UNTOLD LEGENDS: THE WARRIOR'S CODE **FINAL FANTASY XII** RYU GA GOTOKU **24** THE GODFATHER
**REVIEWED** MARIO & LUIGI: PARTNERS IN TIME **MONKEY BALL: TOUCH 'N' ROLL** GAUNTLET: SEVEN SORROWS






Microsoft's **Peter Moore**: "Xbox 360 is the killer app for HDTV adoption. It's driving HDTV monitor sales. A recent study concluded that nine out of ten Xbox 360 owners have either purchased or intend to purchase an HDTV in the next six months. And 90 percent of them say that it was Xbox 360 that is the primary reason for making that purchase, 90 percent of them say it's about Xbox 360."

Nintendo's **Reggie Fils-Aime**: "The movie industry understands the need to move beyond special effects. But the videogame industry apparently does not. As we stand here with a new generation of even more powerful game technology about to be unleashed there are two very different strategies in play. Sony and Microsoft are racing toward the same goal – shiny new versions of the same old games. And we're not suggesting that's wrong... But it's not the only way. And maybe even not the best way."

Sony's **Phil Harrison**: "[At] Tokyo Game Show not only did we show a lot of forward momentum from a content point of view but you could see from the breadth of support that the PlayStation 3 has garnered from the industry that this is going to be the major format choice for the industry going forward."

It appears that, in this console war, we are dealing with some wide-ranging priorities – except in the case of Sony, which seems focused simply on one thing: beating its rivals. Which is why the company is the focus of this month's cover feature (see p46), a piece centred on issues, not spoken promises. Read it and let us know how you see this particularly juicy episode panning out (email edge@futurenet.co.uk) – next month's Inbox will be dedicated to the topic.



# EDGE

EDITORIAL
Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
**Edge** website www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
**Tony Mott** editor
**Margaret Robertson** deputy editor
**Ian Evenden** production editor
**Duncan Harris** writer
**Christophe Kagotani** Tokyo bureau
**Darren Phillips** art editor
**Andrew Hind** deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Koji Aizawa, Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, Brandon Boyer, Paul Drury, Joao Diniz-Sanches, Tim Guest, Jon Jordan, Simon Parkin, Gary Penn, Ben Schroder, Oliver Welsh

Cover: Roger Harris/Science Photo Library (Planet Earth)
Inside covers: Larry Landolfi/Science Photo Library
Raising Voices: Cristina Pedrazzini/Science Photo Library

PRODUCTION
**Colin Polis** Future Plus buyer
**Kirsty Bell** senior production coordinator
**Rose Griffiths** production manager
**Kim Brown** marketing executive

CIRCULATION
**Russell Hughes** trade marketing manager
**Duncan Shearer** group circulation manager

ADVERTISING
**Jayne Caple** advertising director
**Clare Williamson** head of sales
**Darren Gratton** advertising manager
**Ryan Ferguson** online ad manager
**Stuart Harris** classified
**Advertising phone** 01225 442244

PUBLISHING
**James Binns** publisher
**Kim Brown** product manager
**Simon Wear** international licensing director

SUBSCRIPTIONS & DISTRIBUTION
**Edge**,
Future,
FREEPOST RLSC-SXSE-SKKT
Unit 4, Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, Leicestershire, LE16 9EF.
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SENIOR MANAGEMENT
**Roger Parry** non-executive chairman
**Greg Ingham** chief executive
**John Bowman** group finance director

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"People think foot pain is a fact of life. But life is actually better than that"














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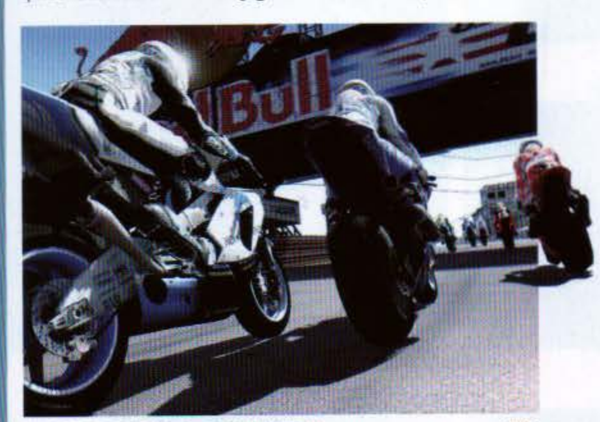
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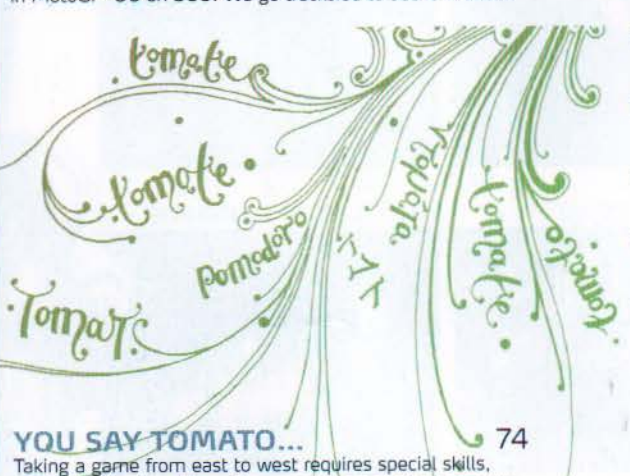

















## Every month



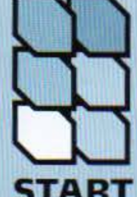
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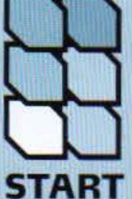
## Hype



# Review



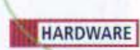




# START


START
DELL
Real Site
XBOX 360
遂に次世代機登場!!
ビックカメラ
緊急
無料
ポイント
サービス!
さらに
ボーナス
ポイントアップ
ビックカメラ「今年一年の感謝を込めて」12/31まで
5%
AM10:00
PM9:00
A館
B館





HARDWARE

# 360 falls short in Japan

**It may be a marathon, not a sprint, but 360 struggled to leave the starting blocks in Tokyo**

Three years after the machine's entrance into the territory, the Xbox market in Japan has been marginalised to the point of subject-changing embarrassment. Since the initial launch that saw a fairly respectable 120,000+ console sales, shrinking display space in stores and disappointing chart numbers have tracked a decline in interest that has come seemingly from both provider and consumer.

It's an ominous climate for Microsoft's return engagement – the last stop for Xbox 360's global launch – finding the company in the difficult situation of committing stock that would be a sure sell in the west to prove its commitment to an indifferent East. Though the 150,000 unit shipment is the smallest of the three markets, the Japanese 360 package content and pricetag is arguably the most appealing – even if Japanese analysts had previously condemned its pricing.

A month away from launch, the 360's imminent arrival was indicated less by sparse advertising than by the larger retailers' dumping of Xbox hardware and software. Entire Xbox shelves were relegated to the now-infamous wagon sales, with new titles discounted to ¥2,980 (£15) and the back catalogue stripped to a few hundred yen: to add insult to injury, even this heavily reduced stock sold sluggishly. However, approaching the December 10 launch all trace of the Xbox had disappeared from many stores, suggesting Microsoft may have accepted returns in order to win shelf space for the 360. In terms of software, there was worryingly little to fill that space, with its launch line-up shrinking as the launch date approached. The delay of major titles *DOA4* and *Ninety-Nine Nights* (and worse, their lack of confirmed release dates following launch) left *Ridge Racer 6* as the only obvious system-seller.

**A month away from launch, Xbox 360's imminent arrival was indicated less by sparse advertising than by the larger retailers' dumping of Xbox hardware and software**

Just prior to the 10th, Tokyo's major retailers announced they would open at 7am to support the launch – despite the abundance of 360s still stacked behind reservation desks, and a tangible lack of media swell behind the announcement. Microsoft itself would return to the Tsutaya store in central Shibuya's Q-Front building, commandeering its enormous screen for a countdown to the event, but this time Bill Gates would not be in attendance.

The pearly whites of the very first owner of a new console, 360's flanked here by Microsoft Japan's Yoshihiro Maruyama and Xbox's US chief Peter Moore, is a familiar image from many a hardware launch. In this instance, certain smiles were to rapidly fade

A walk through Tokyo at 5am on the Saturday found several western journalists in search of storefront queues, but less of the queues themselves. At the Q-Front, which had mustered a crowd roughly equal parts Microsoft officials and customers, Japanese Xbox division general manager Yoshihiro Maruyama and Peter Moore made brief speeches to thank early adopters for their support, before Tsutaya opened for business. Nearby, at Shibuya's Bic Camera – one of Tokyo's biggest discount retailers – employees braved the freezing morning alone, with some eventually taking to the streets in the hopes of soliciting interest from early-rising shoppers. Turnout was similarly subdued in Akihabara and Shinjuku, with the latter district's customary focal point of launch activity, Yodobashi Camera, attracting only a few dozen people. In Ikebukuro's Bic Camera, receiving some 20 shoppers, a store representative commented that the 7am opening was poorly chosen and publicised by Microsoft, which he felt accounted for the 360's slow start. Other retailers



When Microsoft puts on a show, plenty of spectators and press representatives turn out to see what all the fuss was about. That didn't translate into consumer interest, however, and stock levels remained high





Considering the huge marketing spend that went into the Japan launch, public awareness shouldn't have been an issue. Yet many consumers still felt isolated from the second Xbox brand



As was the case in both the US and UK, leading Microsoft figures (Peter Moore, specifically) made momentary minor celebrities of the very first 360 adopters. Moore was later seen to be manning the counter as the early (and only) waves came trickling in

we questioned during the day admitted that they were expecting turnout to be slight, and that in many cases up to half of their 360 sales were to Chinese resellers – an operation that seemed to be running without the near-military regime of last year's PSP launch.

With no sellout in sight by the weekend's end, attention among the Japanese media turned to the absence of a triumphant press release from Microsoft's press channel. It was the market analysis companies who would break the silence,

**With no sellout in sight by the weekend's end, attention among the Japanese media turned to the absence of a triumphant press release from Microsoft's press channel**

with Media Create putting out an early 360 sales estimate of 41,817 units. Famitsu publisher Enterbrain claimed a contrasting 62,000 – but the final number provided by Microsoft was more in line with Media Create's at 43,970, a little under a third of the country's initial shipment.

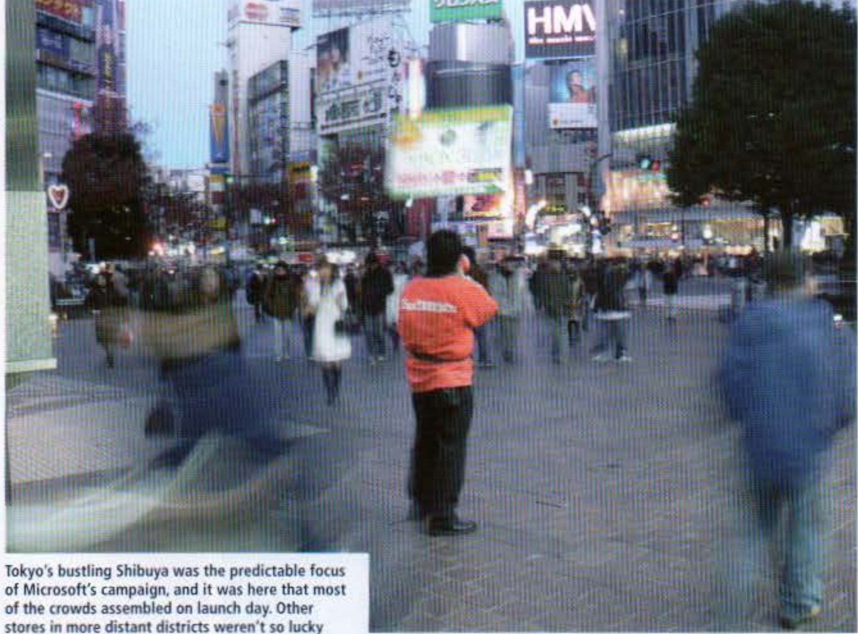
**If that was** obviously a figure below Microsoft's expectations, even after its failures to placate Japanese media or connect with consumers at recent events, the post-launch party mood wasn't completely downbeat. The December 10 launch was referred to as an event to draw out the existing Xbox market, in addition to snaring those early adopters who would buy any new system at launch. On those grounds, the numbers suggest Japan's active Xbox contingent, estimated at around 35-38,000 users, has continued to support Microsoft's efforts.

As for the unconverted masses, the concept of a later 360 'relaunch' seems plausible: in the week following the launch, the Mainichi Shimbun broadsheet ran an interview with Microsoft officials, inferring that HD-DVD technology would be integrated into the 360 for spring 2006. That supposition has since been confirmed by Bill Gates, who used his CES keynote to announce that Microsoft would release an HD-DVD add-on for 360 sometime in 2006, although he didn't confirm any details of pricing. It's an unsurprising move, particularly for the Japanese market: 360 is at an obvious disadvantage to Sony's machine without concessions to a digital-hungry consumer base. As with its previous console, Sony is positioning PS3 as a multifunction media device, with HDMI output and a Blu-ray drive: Microsoft could actually capitalise on the rival HD-DVD format being the first to market.

But for now, 360 sales can rely only on the old-fashioned notion of its software. A second wind was expected for the release of *DOA4*, seemingly delayed every week, until the following week, before finally emerging on December 29. Tecmo's Team Ninja is obviously enjoying its high profile on the platform, using a recent *DOA4* magazine








Tokyo's bustling Shibuya was the predictable focus of Microsoft's campaign, and it was here that most of the crowds assembled on launch day. Other stores in more distant districts weren't so lucky




The bargain price and large stock allocation of 360 premium packs (the only version released in Japan due to MMORPG requirements) was lambasted from overseas by frustrated western consumers still struggling to obtain their consoles, often at dramatically inflated cost






## Who bought what?

### Launch weekend software sales (according to Media Create)

**Six titles strong, the 360's Japanese software line-up was more than a little shy of J Allard's "best launch line-up of any console". Notable numbers include *Perfect Dark Zero* as the only title to come close to selling half of its shipment, and the abject failure of Microsoft Game Studios Japan's only original launch title, *Everyparty*. Dented by a rushed completion and poor Famitsu scores, Game Republic's board game has also suffered from a lack of families to appeal to: its online lobby has remained fairly empty since launch.**

| | |
|---|---|
| Ridge Racer 6 | 22,276 |
| Perfect Dark Zero | 13,758 |
| Need For Speed: Most Wanted | 6,302 |
| FIFA '06 | 2,155 |
| Tetris The Grand Master | 1,614 |
| Everyparty | 1,087 |

advertisement to publicly commit further 360 titles *DOA Xtreme 2*, *DOA Code: Cronos* and 'Project Progressive'.

The biggest upcoming software event, though, is set to be further revelations of the RPGs from Hironobu Sakaguchi's Mistwalker umbrella (rather than in-house development, Mistwalker projects are contracted to Artoon and Cavia). A heavy-rotation television campaign for *Blue Dragon*, the collaboration with famed manga artist Akira Toriyama, has already begun – despite the lack of any playable build or even a projected release date for the title. Managing two other projects – already more RPGs than the first Xbox saw in its lifespan – the pressure on Sakaguchi to sweep the 360 from obscurity to spotlight can only have increased following the launch. Microsoft can claim the best is yet to come, but that's a company line Sony wields with considerably more success in its home territory.



The sight of 360's stricken Japanese launch line-up sat stubbornly in racks couldn't have sat well with Namco, the publisher having publicly anticipated 500,000 sales of *Ridge Racer 6*






# Discounts and shortages spell trouble for industry

A look back at the last 12 months sees manufacturing problems and the absence of a truly big title such as GTA: San Andreas cause worldwide consternation

To say 2005 was a quiet year seems to be an incredible statement to make about 12 months which saw the launch of three consoles (four if you count Game Boy Micro). It's even more surprising considering two of those consoles were the fastest selling ever in the UK, with Nintendo DS's 87,000 record opening-weekend record sale figures in March being trumped by PSP's September 1 blowout of 185,000. But in terms of the things that really matter, game sales, 2005 paled in comparison to a 2004 which was buoyed by huge sellers such as *GTA: San Andreas* and *Halo 2* as well as a raft of steady earners like *Spider-Man 2* and *The Sims 2*.

Such a perfect storm of hits resulted in record software sales in 2004 of $7.3 billion in the US and £1.3 billion in the UK, which were never likely to be bettered. To that extent, 2005 was marked down as soon as analysts started using the term 'transitional' in their January predictions. Microsoft's decision to launch Xbox 360 late in the year only underlined the situation as knowledge of the next generation of consoles always has a negative impact on the previous generation. Sales of the original Xbox, in particular, have hit a brick wall.

**Knowledge of the next generation of consoles always has a negative impact on the previous generation. Sales of the original Xbox, in particular, have hit a brick wall**

As we went to press, final sales figures for the year were yet to be released but it's generally reckoned US software sales could be down between three to five per cent. The reason this matters is profitability. While hardware launches generate queues and headlines, it's the week-on-week sale of full-price games that allow retailers, publishers, distributors and even developers to make money.

To this extent, one notable feature of UK game sales has been the reduction of the average price paid for games. Good news for punters certainly,



The standout success of 2005 was *Nintendogs*, which not only sold over a million copies in both Japan and Europe, but reinvigorated DS hardware sales around the world, too

**Newswire**



**Live loses count**

**Any new year resolutions Microsoft had in mind for the post-launch 360 were quickly sidelined when an alleged technical glitch caused multiple resets of the Xbox Live leaderboards this month. Dismay as scores were dropped from both Live Arcade and conventional Live titles escalated as subsequent scores were again lost amid reports that, following the distribution of unprotected 360 demo code to retailers before Christmas, hacked versions of *HexicHD* had enabled cheating on the online service. An almost immediate response from programming director Larry Hryb insisted: "What happened was not a result of anything security related. This is a bug." The restoration of scores continued as the month went on.**







The third annual iteration of Ubisoft's *Prince Of Persia* franchise proved to be one year too many according to the discounting it received at retail




Coordinating its manufacturing efforts left Microsoft under-delivering on 360 in 2005, which had a significant knock-on effect at retail. Sony suffered, too, although it did manage to shift 185,000 PSPs in its handheld's opening weekend

but it's a concern for the rest of the industry, particularly as supermarkets are increasingly using games as loss leaders. The issue came to a head in October as both Asda and Argos advertised copies of *FIFA '06* for £25, leaving competing retailers to either follow suit, and make no money, or keep their prices higher, and sell no games. The effect of such activity combined with heavy discounting by publishers and 'two for £50' deals at Christmas meant that while the number of games sold in the UK was likely to be slightly up compared to 2004, overall margins were down. In a sign of the times, specialist retailer Game blamed 'significant price deflation as the current generation of consoles reach maturity', before downgrading sales. It then repeated the mantra in early December, announcing annual profits would be down by between 67 to 90 per cent.

In the US, the news was also bad, although not for the same reason. The average price of software remained surprisingly high throughout the year, but it was the number of games sold that was the problem. "Holiday sales are not meeting expectations. For the December quarter, it is likely the industry will be down double digits on a percentage basis," commented EA's chairman and CEO **Larry Probst**, as the company's stock price continued its steady decline from a March high of $70 to end the year at $52.

Elsewhere, Take Two's shares ended 2005 at an all-year low, and there was similar gloom at Activision, which complained US November game sales had been down 20 per cent and December's weren't expected to be much better. Figures from Best Buy revealed September to November game sales were down 12 per cent compared to 2004. Only THQ bucked the trend with sales of *WWE SmackDown! vs Raw 2006* stronger than expected. Its shares were up over 30 per cent year on year.

**The main reason** given for lower than expected US games sales, of course, was hardware availability. The biggest headlines in 2005 concerned Xbox 360 shortages, but the issue affected all console manufacturers to some extent. Ironically, for example, 2004's record software sales would have been higher had Sony and Microsoft been able to produce more

## SOUND BYTES

**"You know what happens when you reach level nine in Metroid? Nothing."**
**Peter Saarsgard's marine** in Sam Mendes' portrayal of the first Iraq War, Jarhead, makes a fair point. Sort of

"To get in character, I gamely tried to level up my character by killing a few monsters. But I couldn't get past the sense of existential emptiness. At one point, a non-player character assigned me a quest of killing all the burrowing beasts in a nearby canyon, to save her town. I'm like, save the town? Lady, the whole damn world is about to end!"
Wired writer **Clive Thompson** on location in the doomed MMO *Asheron's Call 2*, scheduled to go offline by the time you read this

**Question:** You're still producing Halo?
**Jackson:** Yeah.
**Question:** What attracted you to Halo?
**Jackson:** I'm a fan of the game.
**Question:** But videogame movies suck.
**Jackson:** *They do.*
**Question:** So what will be different?
**Jackson:** Hopefully it won't suck.
The informal **Dark Horizons** interview that launched a hundred 'Peter Jackson Talks Halo!' 'news' posts on the internet

"In Nintendo games, women are often depicted as victims. The covers of Nintendo games show males striking a dominant pose. Many games are based upon a scenario in which a woman is kidnapped or has to be rescued."
**Ted Reuter**, assistant professor of political science at DePauw University, Indiana, makes his case for misogyny joining the list of Nintendo innovations

"Yeah, baby!"
**Steve Ballmer** enthusiastically takes a beating from boss Bill Gates during their demo of *Fight Night Round 3* at CES



Even at these prices, the boxes for 'extra' premium Xbox 360 bundles remained empty this Christmas




PlayStation2s and Xboxes last Christmas. Supplies of both systems remained tight until well in 2005.

The difficulties of fulfilling the huge demand for consoles were also demonstrated by the general unavailability of PSP in the UK, and this despite Sony's much-maligned decision to delay the European launch until September, nine months after its Japanese debut. Even Nintendo suffered, with demand for the *Nintendogs* DS bundle outstripping demand and refusing to be placated with the subsequent *Mario Kart DS* bundle.

But it was Xbox 360 that symbolised the seemingly intractable problems console makers have to somehow solve. On one side is the global



The average price of games sold in the UK is dropping quickly as supermarkets aggressively sell new games and older ones turn up in the strangest places, as seen by this latest Post Office gimmick

demand for new gadgets. A necessity for long-term success, the dilemma is that there's the most voracious demand when the manufacturers have least capacity to supply it.

For Microsoft, the process of coordinating three manufacturing facilities in China and synchronising 250 component suppliers from around the world proved hard enough. Unfortunately, together with partners IBM and ATI, it had to manage some of the most complex chip production lines ever created too. And considering Xbox 360 only entered full stage production at the start of October, supply was always going to be tight.

Then Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer revealed chip yields were lower than expected. Combined with other manufacturing issues and systemic overheating fears this meant only around one million units were available before Christmas. Around 650,000 were distributed in North America (compared to the 1.4 million units shipped for Xbox's US launch in 2001), 200,000 in Europe, of which 75,000 went to the UK, and 160,000 in Japan. The figure was well down on the two million units Microsoft originally planned to have in place.

"How hard has it been? Put it this way, harder than we thought it would be. There are reasons no one's ever done this before and we're finding them out," commented **Peter Moore**, Microsoft's corporate vice president of worldwide marketing and publishing, about Xbox 360's simultaneous launch. Whether his conclusion – "But there's still no doubt, it's the right thing to do" – will stand the test of time remains doubtful, though. In hindsight, that decision, particularly one limited by inherent distribution bottlenecks of the Christmas period, now appears overly ambitious. It's one Sony, which has already confessed to chip yield problems in the












With the lure of the next generation of hardware high in the minds of consumers, publishers and retailers had to cut prices and bring in special offers even on high-profile games, such as Ubisoft's *King Kong* and EA's *Harry Potter And The Goblet Of Fire*, to encourage sales



Despite the launch of *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, 2005 wasn't an especially good year for Rockstar, with disappointing sales for *The Warriors* and strong public concern expressed over *Bully*

production of PlayStation 3's Cell processor, is unlikely to copy.

Harder to quantify are the long-term effects. For those still clutching their 360 preorder slips in January, Microsoft's failure to ship as many consoles as planned has been plain annoying. For Microsoft's accountants the problem is also frustrating; the sale of at least a million hardware units will be shifted back into January or February. To some extent, it could also have been seen as passing the PR initiative to Sony, although it will have to overcome similar intractable problems in order to make a success of its PlayStation 3 launch in 2006.

But for publishers with annual sales targets riding on the availability of two million Xbox 360s, the knock-on effects are more serious. Even taking into account J Allard's claims of the best launch line-up ever, most launch software is substandard compared to its successors. Hence a lack of launch hardware means the sales of some launch games will be lost forever. In six months' time, for example, who's going to buy *Quake 4* if *Gears Of War* is out? Could this be related to the decision of some publishers – notably THQ and Take Two – to hold off the release of games such as *The Outfit* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for a couple of months until the missing consoles are supplied?

**But 2005 wasn't** all doom and gloom, with the performance of handheld consoles and software providing welcome success. Nintendo's DS, in particular, had an interesting year. Launched in the US during 2004, by the middle of 2005, sluggish hardware and software sales meant some retailers were already considering its long-term viability. But the young pup proved it could learn new tricks as *Nintendogs* became the breakout game of 2005, shifting over a million copies of the game in Japan and 1.6 million in Europe, something made even more impressive considering 45 per cent of its audience is female.

**DS, in particular, had an interesting year. By the middle of 2005, sluggish hardware and software sales meant some retailers were already considering its long-term viability**

In Japan, where DS has constantly outsold PSP, Nintendo basked in the glory of DS being crowned



## Winners, losers and slippers

**The games you'll be seeing soon, and those you won't**

In terms of success, the top titles of 2005 bore a striking resemblance of those of 2004. The crucial Christmas period was dominated by EA's usual phalanx, *Need For Speed* and the latest instalment of *Harry Potter*, while *The Sims 2* remained in the charts all year round. EA Europe's top seller *FIFA* also did the business in 2005, although the company's bean counters and marketeers must be worried about the continual pressure from Konami's *Pro Evolution*. Year on year, the sales gap between the two arch rivals has been decreasing and there now seems to be something of an inevitability that Konami's tortoise will catch EA's hare at some point.

Another worry must be the latest tarnishing of the Bond licence. Without a current film tie-in, the Sean Connery-fronted *From Russia With Love* proved lifeless and failed to win over its planned younger audience. There were more successful adaptations of the big screen, however, with Ubisoft's officiously named *King Kong: Official Game of The Movie* selling well, albeit on the back of strong publisher discounting. Buena Vista's *Narnia: The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe* did OK too, despite poor reviews.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was Activision's rejuvenation of the *Call Of Duty* brand. Despite the constant invasion of WWII shooters in recent years, it performed well both in the current generation incarnation of *Big Red One*, while the 360 version, *COD2*, was the clear winner in the next-gen stakes, being the most popular launch game. In the US, 77 per cent of 360 owners picked up a copy, trumping Microsoft's perceived killer app *Perfect Dark Zero* by a factor of two. There were disappointments for the publisher too, however. Its big original hope for 2005, free-roaming western shooter *Gun*, proved, once again, that cowboys are not an interesting playground for most gamers, while switching the backdrop of urban shooter *True Crime* from LA to NYC also seemed a turn-off, especially for US audiences.

Some of the biggest headlines in 2005 concerned games that remained unreleased. Rockstar is usually happy to take the media flak, but its 'brutally funny' *Bully* found itself acting as a lightning conductor for much wider societal concerns. The planned October release was pulled, with the due date now April. Other key titles suffering from the dreaded slippage, less controversially, included EA's *The Godfather* and Vivendi's Scarface, while THQ's long-awaited PC FPS *STALKER* seems to have fallen off the radar entirely.




## WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

**With the ever-increasing ubiquity of Flash, the web has, for better or worse, become the premier source for an unending stream of casual gaming content, be it bedroom coded, professionally produced or hackneyed thinly veiled advertisement.**

**Thankfully Jay Bibby, a graduate student in game design and development and proprietor of Jay Is Games, is there to act as a filter, amplifying the worthy gaming signal and ignoring the remainder of the noise. More than just a disposable link log, Bibby gives most games a sizeable write-up with a touch of analysis, and his list of recommendations is an indispensable archive of the past two years of web hits. If *Orisinal, Eyezmaze* and point'n'click 'escape the room'-style games are your cup of tea, look no further.**







**If you had an Xbox 360, there was plenty of software available, albeit at premium prices. Best-sellers on the system included *Call Of Duty 2* and *Madden '06***

the fastest-selling console ever as it reached five million sales within 13 months. With 3.5 million units sold in Europe, that takes the worldwide sales tally to nearly 13 million DSes. And as if that wasn't enough, the company, which had previously doubted the value of online gaming, launched free-to-play wifi-enabled titles such as *Mario Kart DS* and *Animal Crossing: Wild World* and ended the year with over 550,000 online players. 2005 was Nintendo's best year in an age.

For Sony, its 'Walkman for the 21st century' – the PSP – also experienced success, even if the public's enthusiasm has been somewhat muted. As EA's chief financial officer **Warren Jenson** bluntly put it (while going through the long list explaining why the company's predicted figures would be down), "We don't see the PSP getting to the installed base levels in North America or Europe as had been previously anticipated." But Sony remains bullish, announcing in December it had shipped 10 million units (4.5 million to North America, 3 million to Japan and 2.5 million to Europe). A lack of defining software, even in the face of *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, meant sales went into slowdown as the year progressed, however.

And software remains the key for 2006. Of course Microsoft will have to step up its game, both in terms of manufacturing and marketing, but its crucial decisions will revolve around the *Gears Of War* and *Halo 3* campaigns. Even for Sony, with plenty of PlayStation 3 headaches to iron out, its focus will be producing playable demos, and eventually games, that can meet the expectations raised by last year's E3 demos. There's everything still to play for.

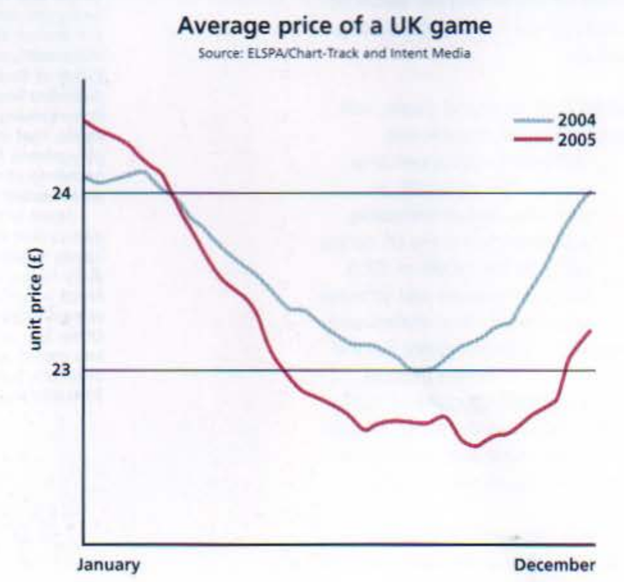
## Tracking sales

**Falling prices and sales spell bad news**

**Directly comparing game sales during 2004 and 2005 on a weekly basis doesn't really offer many profound insights. In general, sales during 2005 tracked 2004's record numbers. Differences, however, include a strong peak in March 2005 when Nintendo DS was launched. Conversely, 2004 sales leapt strongly in October thanks to the release of *GTA: San Andreas*, which remains the UK's fastest-selling game ever. What is more educational is to compare the average prices. In this graph, the volatility of the weekly data has been removed as prices have been averaged over the trailing six-month period to highlight underlying trends. Manipulated in this way, the weakness of UK game prices during 2005 becomes clear with heavy discounting and the growth of the budget market reducing margins. Another factor would be the lower prices for full-price Nintendo DS software. But even taking this into account, the 75p-odd difference between 2004 and 2005's average prices is bad news for retailers and publishers.**

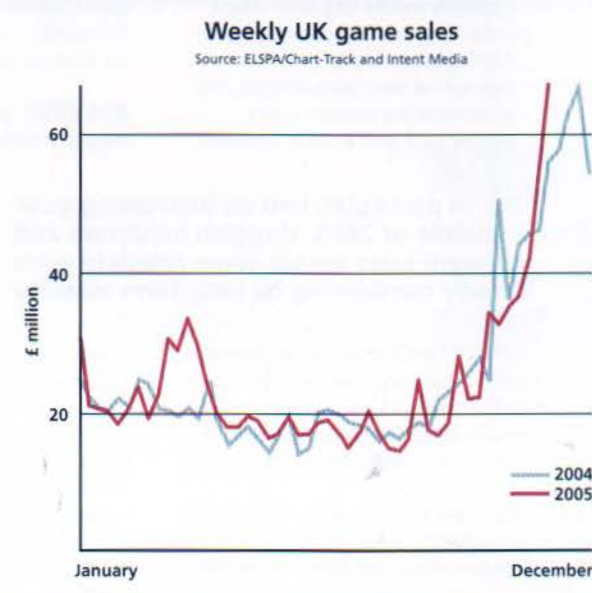
### Average price of a UK game

Source: ELSPA/Chart-Track and Intent Media




### Weekly UK game sales

Source: ELSPA/Chart-Track and Intent Media



## Big hitters: 2005's sales winners

Brian Lara International Cricket (PC, PS2, Xbox)



Call Of Duty 2 (360, PC)



Nintendogs (DS)



Star Wars Battlefront II (PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox)



Gran Turismo 4 (PS2)



FIFA '06 (360, DS, GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox)



Resident Evil 4 (GC, PS2)



Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory (GC, PC, PS2, Xbox)



Lego Star Wars (GBA, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox)



Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (PS2)



Mario Kart DS (DS)



Medal Of Honor: European Assault (GC, PS2, Xbox)



Star Wars Episode III: ROTS (DS, GBA, PS2, Xbox)



NFS: Most Wanted (360, DS, GC, PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox)



Pro Evolution Soccer 5 (PC, PS2, PSP, Xbox)



World Of WarCraft (PC)



FIFA Street (GC, PS2, Xbox)



Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories (PSP)



Peter Jackson's King Kong (360, DS, GC, PC, PS2, Xbox)



Championship Manager 5 (PC, PS2, Xbox)





INTERVIEW

# Backward thinking

Xbox's global platform marketing director reveals how and why 360 honours the past

To some it's pointless, while to others it's a gimmick devised largely to lure early adopters. But Xbox 360's backwards compatibility is no quick fix, and for many it's an ambitious feat of software emulation that's given many games a new, redefined lease of life. Microsoft's **David Reid** (left) links us to the past.

**At what point did Microsoft decide that backwards compatibility was an essential component of 360?**

It was an open debate for a bit, early on in the programme's development. There were perhaps a dozen of us working on Xenon while the rest of the organisation was still very focused on selling the original Xbox. So we started deciding what the important features were, and there was a lot of rich debate about backwards compatibility. I specifically drove some consumer research to find out what it was about backwards compatibility that was important to people. What people told us was that it may be less about playing the games and more about having the *ability* to play the games.

**"What people told us was that it may be less about playing the games and more about having the ability to play the games. The clincher was the importance of Xbox Live"**

The clincher in my mind was the importance of Xbox Live, and how we really saw things take off in the winter of 2004. So there was that confluence of things in mid-2003 that inspired the effort, and it was in the winter of '04 that we knew we'd made the right decision.

**Does the criticism you're received bother you?**

It's one of those things where some gamers want next-generation games on next-generation consoles and don't understand why this is such a spirited debate. But there are a lot of people for who this is very, very important. It's not as easy a message for people to understand as maybe they thought it should be, especially when you compare



When Bungie unveiled teasing glimpses of *Halo 2* cinematics running with FSAA and upscaled to 720p, the difference seemed negligible. On a big HDTV set, however, the game is sharp and striking

**Newswire**



**Phantom struggles on**

**Coming shortly after the November resignation of former chairman Kevin Bachus was Infinium Labs' announcement that the Phantom Lapboard – a wireless keyboard/mouse component of its notorious Phantom gaming service – would appear in Q2 2006. As has become the company's dubious defining trait, however, the announcement was shrouded in persistent concerns as to the wellbeing of both company and console. Recent financial reports have suggested defaults on several short-term loans as well as on all of its major game licensing agreements, delays in acquiring enough working capital to secure thirdparty assistance, and rising indebtedness to the tax office. Unsurprisingly, no release announcements have been made regarding the service's chief hardware client – the Phantom Game Receiver.**

*Ninja Gaiden* and its transformed *Black* release were problem scenarios for the Microsoft emulation team, immediately prompting reports of bad framerates and unreliability from many early adopters

it, for instance, to how Sony has done things. But the solution, in many ways, is actually superior. When you think that we've got every game up there running in 720p with antialiasing, we've effectively done the vinyl-to-CD transformation in terms of performance.

**Is popularity the only criteria for choosing games, or does the difficulty posed by games such as *Project Gotham Racing* place them further down the list?**

The number-one criteria is what the community tells us is most important. You basically build your software emulator and then run titles against it and see how they do. Some games that are more technically ambitious, more clever in their code or have unique aspects are more difficult to emulate because they don't share a lot of similarities with other titles. We get a lot of emails asking – and this is my personal favourite – 'How did you prioritise *Barbie's Horse Adventure* above game X?' And the answer, of course, is that we didn't. I mean, I'm not knocking the game – it has a following – but it was a less technically ambitious game that just happened to work.

**Was the issue with *Halo* support breaking upon the initial release of emulator 1.2 a sign of how difficult the emulator is to develop, or were you instead pushing things too hard?**

*Halo* was a case where, like most titles, it ran really well in the lab but, unlike most titles, something was exposed when people starting downloading the patch on to their own systems. The outcome of that was that we got the feedback right away – people let us know that something wasn't right. Literally, it was the middle of the night here when this happened, and many folks were already on holiday. But there were enough people here in the office to start working on it right away, and they shipped a fix within 24 hours.

I think it's testament to how seriously we take what we're doing here. We understand what's important to gamers: we're not trying to take shortcuts, we're working really hard, and some of the best developers at Microsoft are working on this – people who have been moved from across the company to put their best skills into this very difficult challenge.

**What sort of computer backgrounds do the staff members have?**

They're from various parts of software testing and development. The way I characterise it is the way Bill [Gates] characterises it: it's low-level detective work. This is a much specialised skill set, and there aren't many, even in Microsoft which employs some 60,000 people, who are capable of doing this work.

**How often can we expect updates?**

Well, one thing's for certain: the team right now is principally on holiday – they've worked really hard and are taking time out into January to spend with their families. But when they come back, there's that list of prioritised titles to start working on. When there's a critical mass of titles that make it worthwhile to update, that's when it's time to ship. The next one will certainly be in 2006, and certainly in the spring, but who knows in which exact month that might be?

*An extended version of this interview can be found at www.edge-online.com*



OUT THERE



**G-WHIZZ**

**Iriver has revealed a few, scant details of its new G10 handheld at this year's Consumer Electronics Show. The device, which sports a four-inch 800x480 widescreen display, up to 8Gb of internal memory and runs on Windows CE 5.0, will presumably retain all the functionality of iriver's previous devices – music, movies, pictures, text, and even playing Flash games – as well as boasting 3D gaming capabilities. Though the screen image shown is clearly currently a mockup, if the G10 can indeed offer, via its partnership with wifi service provider WiBro, an online version of hit Korean MMO-racer *Kart Rider* – which has 12 million registered users, earned developer Nexon $110m in 2004 and has grown large enough to draw government attendance of recent sponsored events – it could give the device a strong push in its home country, if not beyond.**





"In the middle of a storm we can sway the branches of the trees," explains Salazar of the advantages of modern 3D, "have constant rain made of particles, lightning that strikes a tree and brings it down, and other details that [*King's Quest*] couldn't have had before"




# Defenders of the crown

## The fan creators of The Silver Lining explain how Vivendi turned a king's quest into a crusade

A legion of fans rallied to the call when Phoenix Online Studios – a global assembly of amateur developers putting its love of Sierra's *King's Quest* into an unofficial ninth instalment – was told by copyright owner Vivendi to cease and desist. After a matter of weeks, the title aptly rose from the flames, stripped of its initial *King's Quest* moniker but granted a crucial one-off licence. Project director **César Bittar** and PR director **Saydmell Salazar** recount the tale.

**How stringent are the changes that Vivendi Universal forced you to make?**

**César Bittar:** Aside from changing the game's title, everything else remained intact: characters, backgrounds, story and so on. Even though we're still in discussions about legal details, they were generous enough to let us use as much as possible without further changes.

**You must have known that VU would step in at some point, especially as the game entered its final stages and public awareness grew. Did you have a backup plan?**

**Saydmell Salazar:** Obviously, it was something we knew could happen but, to be honest, never expected to *actually* happen. We'd been out there for about three years, yet they never seemed to have any concerns. Beyond the second year, we thought we weren't a true threat to VU's IP, just a group of fans trying to create something good out of that. To cut a long story short, we became way bigger than what we ever imagined, and I guess that caught their attention.

**CB:** We'd mentioned before that we could try to go the original route by stripping the game of all *King's Quest* references, but that would have resulted in having to rewrite the script completely. However, in case it was impossible to reach an agreement, we were planning to move ahead with other projects and then try again with Vivendi once we'd become an established company.

**Do you feel that the freedoms you enjoy by working alone outweigh the additional resources and facilities you'd have at your disposal by working with a publisher?**

**SS:** I don't believe that being free of a publisher's command makes our life any easier; in fact it makes it harder. It'd be easier to sit down and fully commit to this, instead of having to deal with everything else *plus* this. We could focus our attention on getting a much higher quality and production rate. We can, in fact, speak for the team when saying we would give up the 'freedom' for having something more settled any day.







As a testament to the global nature of the project, 24-year-old film student Bittar (above) and 22-year-old business administrator Salazar operate out of Florida and Caracas respectively. He began work on the game in 2001, she the next year, with both regarding the blossoming volunteer team as a second family

### Newswire

**Blizzard clamps down**

**No sooner had *World Of Warcraft* developer Blizzard issued its December announcement of a five-million userbase for its all-conquering MMORPG than a second, less celebratory statement was made. The company revealed that its administrators had closed over 18,000 user accounts for the game, citing breach of useage terms and conditions as the overall reason. The majority of users involved were said to have been using thirdparty hacks and applications to farm in-game currency, damaging its considerable economy. The opportunity was also taken to remind users of the company's zero tolerance policy towards those who sell *WOW* content for real-world currency, encouraging the report of any such behaviour to either a Games Master or via email to Blizzard itself.**

**Have you had any contact with original *King's Quest* designer Roberta Williams since the project began?**

**CB:** Roberta is aware of the project and, even though she has never been involved – for obvious reasons – she has always given us her support and best wishes. Ken [Williams, co-founder of Sierra Online] mentioned once that were he still the head of Sierra, he would have signed our project.

**Was 3D always going to be used for *The Silver Lining*, or did you consider reverting to a pre-*Mask Of Eternity* 2D design?**

**CB:** We wanted to retain the basic style of the previous games by keeping the screen-to-screen gamestyle. So, what you have with *The Silver Lining* is a screen-to-screen 3D game. The player can't move the camera at will, but we can move it to wherever we want for cutscenes, conversations and the like. It also makes for a completely dynamic world in contrast to the static screens that are seen in 2D games.

**SS:** The thing about *The Silver Lining* is that it's not the 3D you've seen in other adventures games. It's a nice combination of a 3D universe with a specific art concept, and even though things were made with real-life shapes as references, it still has the adventure and fantasy theme; the textures are mostly hand-painted, and the characters retain their charm.

**Is the project now fixed to a specific creative blueprint, or do you still find yourselves adopting any good ideas that fans suggest?**

**CB:** Everything has been already thought out for the design, and we pretty much finished that phase way back in 2003. We started full production at the end of that year and ever since it's been a matter of getting it done. We can't be as flexible as we'd like – the plot is really complex and the smallest of changes can affect the whole design document in ways we may not even realise until we reach later parts – so we try our best to leave it untouched unless completely necessary.

**"It's a nice combination of a 3D universe with a specific art concept, and even though things were made with real-life shapes as references, it still has the adventure and fantasy theme"**

**Do you find that most applicants wish to take part because they love the *King's Quest* series, or because they wish to add to their own portfolio of work?**

**CB:** Initially, we only got *King's Quest* fans, but as the project grew and we established an image of being perhaps the most ambitious fan project to date, we started getting individuals that had never played a game in the series before. We have team members that have used their portfolio to get jobs at Activision, Ubisoft and LucasArts.

OUT THERE



## AVOID MISSING BALL

Celebrating gaming's early days of just two white bars and a dot, pong.mythos, a multimedia exhibit curated by Berlin's Computerspiele Museum, aims to show 'the technical and social historical circumstances under which *Pong* managed to become a key influencing factor for the emergence of a whole industry'. To do so, they've assembled works from more than 20 artists, featuring a number of classics – the fully sized Blinkenlights, the fully analogue Pongmechanik, and the fully masochistic Painstation – and a written intro from the father of *Pong*, Ralph Baer, to explore every angle of the game's significance over the last few decades. The exhibit will open in February at the Württembergische Kunstverein Stuttgart, and from there will go on tour around Europe for the rest of the year.

● pong-mythos.net



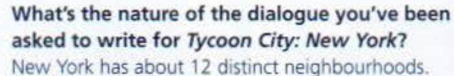

# We'll make Manhattan

Tycoon City: New York scribe Robin Epstein explains how the game stays true through its words

Before you tug the mouse in the direction of any elaborate HUDs, a modern tycoon game will have already told you much of what you're looking for via its informative, expressive denizens. That's what the makers of *Tycoon City: New York* would have realised when they asked local writer and comedienne **Robin Epstein** (above) to pen in-game dialogue that captured –rather than caricatured – the city's vibrant streets. We caught up with her one Manhattan afternoon for some additional words.

**"Being a New Yorker and someone who really loves the city, I wanted this to be as good as possible, because I know the streets, the lingo and the people"**

**What's the nature of the dialogue you've been asked to write for *Tycoon City: New York*?**
New York has about 12 distinct neighbourhoods. The first thing I did was go through everything from the baseline of what you'd see on the streets, what sort of shops predominate in each area, and the defining features of the people you'll find. For example, though there are only a few blocks' difference, you'll find that people who live on the east side are *very* different people from those who live on the lower east side.



**Did you approach the job on *Tycoon City* specifically as game scripting, or simply as an extension of a traditional creative genre – comedy, for example?**
I approached it basically as screenplay writing. Obviously, these were very short snippets that I was writing at a time, but the hope was that I was creating a scene and that you'd understand these characters very quickly based on the dialogue that they were speaking.

**Did you have to worry about conforming to the framework of a videogame at all, or was that all dictated to you in advance?**
That was fairly well circumscribed: they were looking for certain things to sit within the game in required places. But there was a lot of back and forth between me and them, and they were very good about listening to my suggestions, like if I thought they were missing the point of what a character was saying.

**Has being a New Yorker given you the ability to write the game in a way that you believe no outsider could?**
You'll find that people here are very protective, because New York is so commonly caricatured, and to a certain extent I suppose that's because it makes it easier for people who aren't here to understand it. Being a New Yorker and someone who really loves the city, I wanted this to be as good as possible, because I know the streets, the lingo and the people. I think you miss the nuances when it comes from someone who doesn't live here. I hope I've done the city justice [laughs]: if they get upset, I guess I'll have to move out.

**Have you had much prior experience with games and their dialogue?**
Not a lot of experience before this. Atari, I guess, was my virgin run in the *Pong* days. There was a lot of dialogue coming from me as I was cursing the screen, but not too much in-game.






**Providing character to a single videogame avatar is enough of a challenge without having to worry about 59,999 more. At least *Tycoon City's* urban dwellers only speak when they're zoomed in on, and will most likely keep their conversation limited to fleeting wisecracks, complaints and informative announcements. Still, maintaining diversity throughout them all is a daunting task**



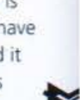
# Microsoft's latest burning issue

Internet communities come alive as 360 launch fever gives way to fears of a fault epidemic

Reports of high-profile, cutting-edge hardware malfunctioning are customarily taken with spoonfuls of salt, as are flurries of internet forum outrage. When the two combine with the force and venom of Xbox 360's initial feedback, however, you have to reconsider their validity. Overheating, OS glitches, netcode defects and orientation-detection flaws have all been pitched as causes for the repeated (sometimes terminal) freezes that curse affected users, but what's really happening, and to how many?

This much has become clear: never have so large a number of new console owners been exposed (whether directly or through friends) to broken machines. It's likely precise figures will never be announced, but enough verified experiences have passed through this office to suggest that the problems are substantial. The alleged symptoms are widespread, and though it's likely that many of them do only occur within usually accepted tolerances of around 3-5% of machines, the heat-related issues stand out.

Microsoft has issued no official statement beyond its reiteration that there is no systemic design fault and the suggestion that 360 remains reliable. Its policy has been to despatch prepaid shipping boxes to affected customers, offering a three-day turnaround upon receipt of their faulty unit, and reports suggest that this system is working well. However, stock difficulties have generated inevitable, sporadic delays, and it remains to be seen whether the problems will be remedied in newer 360 batches.



## Continue

**360 demo downloads**
EA's gorgeous *Fight Night Round 3* leads the way

**Respecting the past**
Or: yes, 360 backwards compatibility works

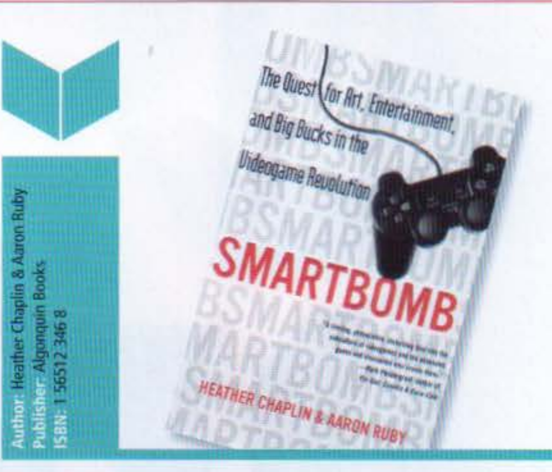
**360 Achievements**
Changing the way games are consumed. Forever?

## Quit

**360 Achievements**
We haven't enough time for all this. Have we?

**New format wars**
We only want Blu-ray or HD-DVD, not both

**Bundle merchants**
How to make it into Quit two months in a row




Author: Heather Chaplin & Aaron Ruby
Publisher: Algonquin Books
ISBN: 1 56512 346 8

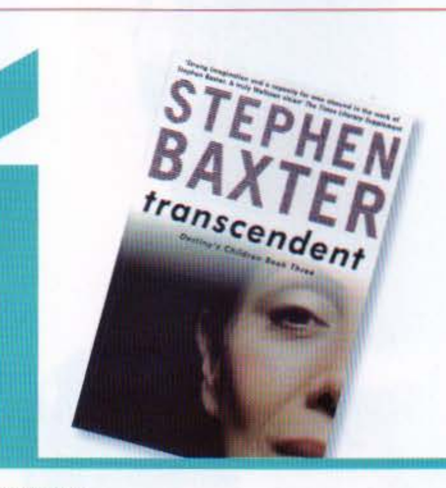
### SMARTBOMB

**Previously covered in E157's gaming books feature, but now officially available from UK stores**

When it comes to books such as Smartbomb, there's always a critical issue in terms of tone. Keen to highlight that the industry is now 'bigger than movies', authors also want to prove their gamer credentials and talk about the hours they've spent in front of *Halo 2*. The result is often a book that doesn't provide anything like enough detail in either area. Too anecdotal for the business reader, and gamers don't read anyway, right?

But despite its cookie-cutter overtones and pompous subtitle – 'The Quest for Art, Entertainment and Big Bucks in the Videogame Revolution' – Smartbomb tries hard to overcome this dilemma. Each author has their own speciality, with Chaplin taking business and Ruby games. Another enlightened move is the decision to ignore sterile talk of companies and games for a more gossipy tone, which is focused on the personalities of some of the better known developers. The first chapter, for example, is a gonzo-style account of a year in the life (and wardrobe) of Epic's Cliffy B as he pimps his way around shows such as GDC and E3.

The interest level then drops off for a couple of chapters as the mandatory Nolan Bushnell history lesson is unwrapped, which is followed by the role of Miyamoto and then the Carmack-Romero glory years. The best chapter, however, is on Will Wright. Of course, this is mainly because Wright is one of the few true geniuses of the game industry, but nevertheless it's almost worth the cost of the book alone.




Author: Stephen Baxter
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07431 0

### TRANSCENDENT

**Conclusion to Baxter's Destiny's Children series combines the best of present and future worlds**

As seems to be the way with the concluding parts of trilogies, it's a case of back to the beginning with Transcendent. Despite heading 25,000 years into the future for inbetweener Exultant, we're back in the time of Baxter's everyman hero George Poole, who kicked off the series in Coalescent. Actually, George is on the way out. Marooned in the 2050s, where humans are fighting for their existence in the face of the changing climate, the old man's rejection of technology has landed him with inoperable cancer. "At least it was my choice," he grumbles. So instead it's his nephew Michael who takes up the story. Another ambivalent figure, he's haunted by the death of his wife during childbirth – literally. But, as becomes clear, the visitations are more than tricks of the light. Indeed Watchers, the result of half a million years of human evolution, have plans for Michael, as they, in turn, struggle to overcome the fundamental questions of our existence.

The book creates a heady mix of the mundane, the metaphysical and the theological; a battleground of ideas that Baxter has made his own throughout this Destiny's Children series. Transcendent certainly doesn't disappoint, whether in itself or as the conclusion of the previous 1,000-odd pages. And even if some chapters feel like they've been lifted from a philosophy text, there's enough momentum in the storytelling to get you through to a conclusion that is almost evangelical in tone.

# INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

## Dark Sector

**FORMAT:** TBC **PUBLISHER:** D3PUBLISHER



Finally a publisher is announced for Digital Extremes' imaginative step into Kojima territory. Fans of the E3 trailer expecting a quick turnaround, however, must settle for a Q3 2007 release instead

## Blazing Angels: Squadrons Of WWII

**FORMAT:** 360, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Two generations of Xbox hardware will now play host to Ubisoft Romania's squadron shooter, current screens suggesting enough visual promise in the original Xbox build to bode well for 360

## Bullet Witch

**FORMAT:** 360 **PUBLISHER:** AQ INTERACTIVE



The first game to be announced by conglomerate publisher AQ is this thirdperson actioner. Different cinematic techniques will lend each level unique character and epic tone, says developer Cavia

## Unreal Tournament 2007

**FORMAT:** PC, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY



A greater emphasis on vehicular combat is good news for fans of Onslaught mode, while solo play and a persistent Warfare mode also receive focused attention in this so-called PS3 killer app

## Dirge Of Cerberus: Final Fantasy VII

**FORMAT:** PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SQUARE ENIX



The plundering of *FFVII* continues into over-shoulder thirdperson, its action kept smooth via dynamic levels of visual detail. CG is of predictably high standard, though gameplay quality is less clear

## Taito Memories Pocket

**FORMAT:** PSP **PUBLISHER:** TAITO



The absence of a major *Bubble Bobble* title (*Rainbow Islands* is the closest you'll get) makes for a less legendary line-up than the recent home collections, though four modernised updates appear

## OutRun 2006: Coast 2 Coast

**FORMAT:** PC, PS2, PSP **PUBLISHER:** SEGA




Another bundle of joy from the partnership of Sega and Sumo, this time expanding on the developer's already hearty conversion of AM2's cross-country drift. PS2/PSP interoperabiltiy is planned

## Lost Planet: Extreme Condition

**FORMAT:** 360 **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Another genre-splicing experiment from Capcom, with a name that itself seems to have been cobbled together from several others. Mechs and monsters collide, but not until next winter

## Cry On

**FORMAT:** 360 **PUBLISHER:** AQ INTERACTIVE



A second AG game, this time a collaboration between Sakaguchi's Mistwalker studio and Cavia. The Kimihiko Fujisaka-illustrated action-RPG champions freedom alongside strong storytelling



## INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Dad 'n' Me

www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/254456

For as much as *Alien Hominid* was tribute to the hallmarks of side-scrolling shooters, *Dad 'n' Me*, The Behemoth's latest Flash-powered creation, is its ode to *Double Dragon*, *River City Ransom* and countless other legendary brawlers.

Showing all the same propensity for innocently cheerful ultraviolence that typified *Hominid*, players take the role of a deathmasked musclebound toddler bringing his smoking purple ruinous rage to the playground and other stretches of suburban sprawl. Though initially you'll be turning your remorseless aggression toward defenceless thumbsuckers, boy scouts and the slightly more aggressive bullies, soon enough bands of preschool ninjas crawl out from the woodwork, giving you a chance to pick on someone your own size.

Just as the web version of *Hominid* gave the net a taste of what was to come, given that its next console release has shown similar beat 'em up leanings, *Dad 'n' Me* also has the added benefit of being a likely preview to the juggling combo technology behind The Behemoth's next revivalist love-in.





Despite its age, the huge number of Japanese gamers who have already played it, its previous status as a Sony flagship and the poor quality of its lobby systems compared to the usual Live benchmark, *Final Fantasy XI* is still seen in Japan as one of the best reasons to own a 360

# SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



## Where did it all go wrong?

Famitsu PS2's Koji Aizawa reflects upon a disappointing second start

**A disappointing launch for the Xbox 360 in Japan has many suggesting that Microsoft is still losing the battle to win territory in the gaming industry's third biggest market. To me, this isn't so – Microsoft's new hardware is a powerful weapon; all it needs is to find the right strategy and ammunition. Despite an alluring launch event at the 360 Lounge on Aoyama (Tokyo's most fashionable street), and Peter Moore helping to count down to midnight at a large entertainment store in Shibuya, few of the attendees opted to take the new console home.**

Why was it that 360 – for all the advertising and awareness – has so far sold even fewer units than its predecessor? With so many dramatic improvements to its hardware and software systems, surely sales would have increased? Admittedly, the industry here as a whole has been troubled in recent months by waning consumer support, but December was an exception, and the weak start for 360 was the exception to that. 'It's all about the games' is the popular response and there's no question that 360 lacked the killer titles that could have made it a success in Japan.

The attach rate for software sales indicates that around ten per cent of 360 launch day purchasers invested in the machine but in none of its available games. Did they have the possibility of sold-out signs in mind? Were people buying the hardware as a precaution in lieu of better things to come? Of course, the charismatic *DOA4* would have been the most anticipated title, and expectations were high for *Project Gotham Racing 3* and *Ninety-Nine Nights*, which were both released in the New Year. But the biggest things to come may well be the various titles from *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi. Time will tell.

But I think there's more to this story than the availability of next-generation games. Take, for example, the retro compatibility issue. This is a greater concern in Japan than it is in either the US or Europe, with only 12 original Xbox games running on 360 compared to over 200 in those territories. It's said that the list will soon include around 30, but it's surprising to see best-selling Japanese titles such as *DOA3* and *DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball* missing, especially when you consider how few Japanese gameplayers actually experienced them on the original Xbox.

A further issue is the way 360 was promoted. Microsoft wanted to broadcast one message to the entire world. But while the 'Jump In' motif worked in the US, in Japan the TV adverts were often entirely misunderstood

A further issue is the way 360 was promoted. Microsoft wanted to broadcast one message to the entire world. But while the 'Jump In' motif worked in the US, in Japan the TV adverts were often entirely misunderstood. The Xbox may be part of




After an initial flurry, stores remained quiet. Could better marketing have given the 360 some impetus, or was the Xbox brand already so tarnished in Japan that the even new stylings, HD visuals and the promise of some fresh *DOA* delights weren't enough to tempt the early adopters to 'jump in'?

the videogame landscape in North America, but here you'll find little recognition of the brand. Like many others, I never felt the adverts were particularly well adapted for our country. Furthermore, Microsoft failed to appreciate the strength of publicity you can gain through other media such as the DVDs supplied with Japanese magazines. The company was so keen to stress the precision of its machine's HDTV output that it snubbed these forms of advertisement, believing they would be unable to adequately represent its games. For users, however, it could have been a great way to gain an understanding of what 360 stands for.

Personally, I remain hopeful. The quality of HD visuals is evident at a glance and 360 is a great demonstrator. Its use of the widespread and very affordable D4 connector, together with the increasing affordability of HD television sets, works in its favour. Even students can now afford the lower-priced HDTV sets (in the 20-inch and lower range), and popular televised events should soon push the format into more and more homes. This year's Winter Olympics and football World Cup, for example, will continue to boost sales, spreading the opportunity to enjoy 360's graphics.

Also, you can't ignore the popularity of the MMORPG genre in Japan and the prominence of *Final Fantasy XI* within it. Before now, users have been largely unable to enjoy the superior graphics of the PC version in the comfort of their living rooms, having to settle instead for the PS2 broadband version. The 360 makes this possible, and I imagine there'll be a lot of users making the switch from PS2 to 360. Many, in fact, may have been part of that aforementioned ten per cent.

Though most reports you read will dwell on them, my concerns regarding the future of Xbox aren't confined to sales figures. I sincerely hope that Microsoft doesn't abandon its ambitions to succeed in Japan, despite this disappointing start. The size of the US and European markets is such that Japanese game developers certainly consider 360 a viable platform. But if its manufacturer gives up in our country, then the PS3 will effortlessly seize its support.

# Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

## Edge's most wanted

### Metronome



Considerable developments appear to be underway over at Tarsier's Swedish headquarters: a publisher, most probably, and a redesign, it seems. We await further news.
TBC, TBC

### Mutant Storm Revolution



The intense, occasionally queasy thrills of *Mutant Storm Reloaded* have stirred up quite an appetite for what Pom Pom could build from scratch for Xbox 360's Live Arcade.
MICROSOFT, 360

### Hellgate: London



The hunger for new western RPGs takes you to Flagship's *Hellgate*, which has innovation to spare with its firstperson perspective and subtle online interaction.
NAMCO, PC

## Games will eat themselves

### The real inspiration for those cooking minigames




*Final Fantasy VII* was a watershed for both RPG design and for the audience that it attracted. How different might things have been for the genre had Square not defected to PlayStation?

It's like one of those puzzles in the Sunday supplement: what letters can come after 'platform', 'action', 'strategy', 'online' or 'classic', or before 'launcher'? Times are good for R, P and G, and as this month's Hype section proves, the genre has never had so many bedfellows. From the beat 'em up moves of *Ryu Ga Gotoka* to the combo juggling of *Key Of Heaven,* from the online deathmatches of *Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code* to the insect chess of *Rogue Galaxy*, RPGs have never exhibited so much diversity. It doesn't seem all that long ago that it was a genre renowned for its willingness to stick to its hidebound traditions, but now these games which share common threads of strong stories and evolving characters are breaking continual new ground.

But there's another thing they share: all but one of the RPGs previewed this month is Japanese. It's long been the favoured game type in Japan, but it's been almost as long since it was flourishing this strongly. Namco hopes, perhaps a little ambitiously, to sell a million copies of *Tales Of The Abyss*, and *Kingdom Hearts II* shifted nearly that many over the Christmas period. But a shadow is looming over the newcomers currently enjoying the sunshine of commercial success: *Final Fantasy XII*. After years of notoriously troubled development, the game looks locked on course for a spring release, and Square Enix is predicting sales of up to 2.5 million, and at a premium price at that. Is the local appetite for epic stories, XP farming and dungeon exploring really that insatiable?

The answer, it would seem, is yes – but only because RPGs are just as insatiable an entity as their players. As this month's selection shows, there's a huge range of play mechanics they can devour and integrate into their basic framework. And that basic framework, which gives players a charismatic, often customisable avatar to represent them and an often beautifully realised and imaginative world which they can explore, plays directly to gaming's strengths: the sense of exploration and of increased potency in the world you discover. And that means it really ought to be possible for every gamer to find an RPG to suit. Which leaves us with a different puzzle altogether: why can't the west do the same?















FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E155**

# Ryu Ga Gotoku

## Sega's two-fisted crime drama carries its arcade brawler history in one and Tokyo's wild side in the other


Most interactions are one-button diversions, not fully fledged minigames (Club Sega's rows of Naomi arcade machines are necessarily unplayable, unlike its UFO catcher) – but bringing Kazuma's unlikely friend along enlivens matters somewhat










Translating as 'Like A Dragon', even the name of the Amusement Vision/ Smilebit hybrid's new title haughtily shrugs off easy classification. It's like the most lavishly staged beat 'em up yet produced, or like a dutifully traditional Japanese RPG with a knowingly modern makeover. It's like the gangster films of Takeshi Kitano and Takashi Miike (fittingly, the latter has produced a live-action prelude to the game), turning from pulverising violence to touching introspection to comic absurdity on a finger-snap. For better or worse, it's *not* like *Shenmue* – as where male ingenue Ryu Hazuki was drawn into a world he didn't understand, brooding Yakuza Kiryu Kazuma is returning to a world he knows only too well.

There's no question that this is Kazuma's game, an impressive feat considering the size and personality of his supporting cast, or the swell of humanity on his stamping grounds' dirty streets. He has physical presence far beyond his vaguely Travolta-esque dark good looks and designer suit, with the camera subtly swaying in time with his shoulders as he walks, and his purposeful sprint barging through crowds to leave bystanders tottering. But it's in the game's increasingly frequent brawls, from ill-advised mugging attempts to chapter-long running battles with entire syndicates, where he's most iconic.

What *Ryu Ga Gotoku*'s combat system lacks in technique – an initial clumsiness never entirely fades, only becomes familiar – it recoups with endlessly, unashamedly satisfying violence. Kazuma's growing set of physical assaults has a 2D brawler's economy, the first connection as weighty as the hundredth, and in the early stages of the game mixing attacks is as much for vicious spectacle as function. It's impossible not to egg him on with a gleeful overkill of melée weapons: if a golf club or katana can't be wrested bodily from an attacker, then a nearby bicycle, chair or carelessly discarded pair of pliers will suffice.

Strings of landed hits fill Kazuma's Heat gauge, which amplifies his blows and softens the damage of incoming attacks, but also allows the triggering of context-sensitive finishing moves. Initially allowing grappled enemies to be slammed face-first into nearby walls or heaved over ledges, later moves introduce weapon-specific finishers and attacks on prone opponents. Lucky enemies are dispatched in a brief bone-splintering cutscene, but hardier ones can then be mashed in time with a button prompt before they have a chance to recover.

Coupled with a breathless escalation of setpieces that's only occasionally sabotaged by camera issues or fuzzy targeting, creator Toshihiro Nagoshi has more than acquitted himself for the numb *SpikeOut: Battle Street*. But if bruising confrontations are the focus, the game still finds time to draw back and let the city emerge, each chapter offering new locations and side-stories. While much of Kamurocho is only for show, it's a compelling show, staged with the obvious experience of

> It's impossible not to egg him on: if a golf club or katana can't be wrested from an attacker, then a nearby bicycle, chair or carelessly discarded pair of pliers will suffice






The story scenes are carefully framed and directed, and show off the game's enormous variety of characters and environments. When certain crowd scenes switch to slightly-less-expensive FMV, it often comes off second best (though certainly cleaner) to the expressiveness of the game engine







Kamurocho is a night city, at its visual best in the contrast of low light and highlights. Daylight scenes can break the spell by being less forgiving to the graphical shortcuts



## Hot sake

Though a sexual undercurrent runs through the game, as is to be expected from its redlight district setting, it's restrained enough to be neither too leering – even female characters referred to by their cup size have the brains to twist their objectification, too – or openly crass.

Winning a club girl's attentions for the night dwells on the intimacy, while elsewhere the massage parlour minigame provides the fantasy – as Kazuma is challenged to 'focus on his mantra' during rose-tinted visions of the masseuse.

the *Jet Set Radios* and to the best of the PS2's abilities – dense in imagery, if smeary in detail. Camera angles are fixed, crowds are silently milling extras and accessible locations serve as RPG standbys (pharmacies and diners to regain health, gambling dens and pachinko parlours to lose money), but as a sense of place, and a grounding for Kazuma within it, it's beguiling.

Away from the main plot trail are some 70 mini-events, only around half of which can be blundered into without active exploration of Kamurocho's warrens. Most are brief and invariably conclude in fistfights – although Kazuma is always on the side of the angels, busting protection rackets or roughing up stalkers – but provide flecks of human detail along with item rewards. It's a crucial, involving backdrop to the swaggering machismo of the game's action, embodied best by the hostess club girls whose professional flirtations can be wooed down to confiding their touching life stories.

Of course, these details suffer the most with an import copy: it's entirely possible to enjoy *Ryu Ga Gotoku* through to its conclusion while barely comprehending a word, but it's also obvious the experience, if not the game, is poorer for it. A western release is expected, given that the game's cinematic influences currently enjoy a higher profile overseas than in Japan, but has yet to be announced. Whether Sega's localisation is up to the daunting task is another matter – penned by a novelist, voiced by professional actors and steeped in local culture, there's much to lose in translation.

Hopefully it will be treated with the importance it deserves, as even with its occasional design flaws and more frequent hardware hiccups it *is* important, showing a Japanese developer ready to make a mature title on its own terms, with its own (videogame) language. For as much as it's Kazuma's game, it's also very much Nagoshi's, to the extent that some details – an impromptu drinking contest, Kazuma's snakeskin shoes, the prankish feedback howl as a microphone stand crashes over a thug's back – could make you wonder if his **Edge** column was really a design diary.




Street fights are *Ryu Ga Gotoku*'s not-entirely-random encounters, taking a moment to load an appropriate back alley, car park or kerbside arena and its improvised weapons

A pitfighting tournament (below) becomes available during the course of the game, and along with a casino provides the most involved side-attraction: facing down kickboxing salarymen is quite the bloodsport



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **NAMCO TALES STUDIO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

# Tales Of The Abyss

Namco's deal with Bandai puts it in a strong position to start telling tales: four of them, in fact



**Characterisation has always been one of the *Tales* games' strongest suits, and *Abyss* rapidly sets up a conflict where Luke is torn between loyalty to his old teacher and attraction to a new ally, that teacher's sister**








**Towns, where you can stock up on ingredients for the cookery functions which are an essential part of the *Tales* experience, are vibrantly drawn, and usually well stocked with NPCs ready to send you off on elaborate subquests**

Sequelitis is endemic in Japanese RPGs, but for those who find the practice of using a simple numerical system to tell one from the other a little dry, the *Tales Of...* series stands as something of warning sign. Keeping a handle on *Phantasia*, *Destiny*, *Eternia*, *Symphonia*, *Rebirth* and *Legendia* only gets harder as Namco releases the latest PS2 game, *Tales Of The Abyss*, and readies *Tales Of Eternia Online* for PC, *Tales of The Tempest* for DS and *Tales Of Melfes* for PSP. Word of Namco applying for trademarks for Tales Of Doom Sign, Tales Of Howling and Tales Of Two Faiths sent many fans into an understandable tailspin, although there's no indication that these names are attached to specific projects as yet.

It's a substantial lineage, nonetheless. The combination of active battle systems, elaborate, voiced stories and memorable music which is the *Tales* hallmark means that the series has long deserved perhaps a little more status than it's often afforded – partly because only the GameCube's *Tales Of Symphonia* was ever released in Europe.

## The combination of active battle systems, elaborate, voiced stories and memorable music means that the series deserves more status that it's often afforded

And Namco, renewed by its recent deal with Bandai, is clearly intending to capitalise on it in coming months.

*Abyss* is the first on the horizon, which brings a flavour of *Symphonia*'s flamboyance to the PS2. Its story quickly reveals the epic scope of a typically tall Tale: a noble son, Luke, finds he is the holder of a rare power – the seventh Fonim – just as war breaks out with a neighbouring kingdom which had kidnapped him as a child. This discovery triggers a quest which takes him from field to town to dungeon, and teams him up with a range of characters whose powerful songs and magic attacks are a perfect foil to his swordplay. Combat is frenetic and physical, Luke charging his special attacks from landing normal blows, and letting rip with powerful combo attacks triggered by simple button combinations. New to *Abyss* is the Field Of Fonim system, which sees elemental attacks have a lasting effect on the battlefield: use a number of skill moves





**Tales Of Eternia Online (left) continues to look extremely promising as it nears its Japanese release, but there's no indication that it will reach the west. Console yourself with GBA *Tales Of Phantasia* (right)**






The field areas (below) offer little in the way of sight-seeing, and wheeling the camera round behind you to look at what little there is to see can take an age. Although there are no random battles, since you get fair warning of the appearance of the enemies which spawn around as you move across the map, some will charge at you so quickly as to make avoidance almost impossible





based around the same Fonim (effectively elements) and you start to create an colour-coded aura which then changes and enhances the property of attacks launched from within it.

Visually, although the game draws on *Symphonia's* charm-heavy toon-shading, much of the game is a little bland. The field areas, particularly, feel rather bleak and are plagued by an inexplicably slow camera. Dungeons have more character, but it's the towns that steal the show – richly detailed and vibrantly coloured, they have a great sense of life. The characters themselves are strongly drawn and charismatic, their interactions played out, as is *Tales tradition,* in short skits you can choose to listen in to as the story progresses.

Early impressions are that this is a strong *Tales* episode but perhaps not an immediate classic. The Field Of Fonim battle mechanic, combined with managing special stat-boosting accessories and bonus-triggering battle abilities, is certainly sophisticated, but doesn't immediately gel into one, strategically satisfying whole. The story, though elaborate, faces a tall order in bringing together an unlikeable hero (Luke's privileged but imperilled background means he's a spoilt and bolshy brat) and a large cast of secondary characters. And visually, *Abyss* now faces off against the new benchmark set by the luscious and inventive *Dragon Quest VIII*. However, there's never any denying the core appeal of an active, boisterous RPG, something which the *Tales* series has never failed to deliver.

There's no word yet on planned European or US releases for *Tales Of The Abyss. Tales Of Legendia*, the previous PS2 game, goes on sale in the US in February, but is also not yet slated for Europe. So, for a European *Tales* fix, you'll need to turn to Ubisoft, which is publishing the PSP remake of the PlayStation's *Tales Of Eternia* on February 6. Or, for importers who want to play catch-up, in the spring – again confirmed only for the US – Nintendo is publishing a GBA port of the original SNES *Tales Of Phantasia*, featuring some of the bonuses included in the celebrated PlayStation rerelease. And just what might that have ended up being called if Namco had decided to go with numbers instead of names?

## The future of Eternity

The SNES's *Tales Of Eternia* – released as *Tales Of Destiny 2* in the US – started with the rock-solid mechanics and visual charm of the SNES *Tales Of Phantasia*, and then took advantage of the PlayStation's power to add detail to the presentation and its optical media to include an unprecedented amount of voice acting and music. Battles take place in a flattened 2D plane, with your hero dashing back and forth to deliver his attacks, and special moves triggered by simple combos with old-school echoes. It's an accomplished port of a quality RPG which Europe missed out on first time round, and should plug a significant gap in the PSP's gaming portfolio.






Although the camera can be set to dynamically follow your teammates' attacks, it can be easy to lose track of them. Their special moves are announced at the top of the screen, letting you know what to expect







Level 5 has always had a love of strange monsters and incongruous robots, and *Rogue Galaxy* gives it the perfect excuse to pepper towns and battles with examples of both







The game's flamboyant characters would clearly benefit from a loving localisation job, but it's not yet clear if Sony is prepared to put the kind of time, money and care into the task that Square Enix did with *Dragon Quest VIII*

# Rogue Galaxy

## Having already conquered the RPG world with Dragon Quest VIII, Level 5 turns its attention to the heavens

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL 5**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

At the end of last year, Famitsu magazine voted Level 5's president, Akihiro Hino, the second most important man in Japanese gaming, just ahead of Nintendo president Iwata. A short five years ago, all the company had to its name was a modest but imaginative RPG called *Dark Cloud*. It's been quite a rise, from the low of the cancellation of *True Fantasy Live Online* to the high that is *Dragon Quest VIII* – and *Rogue Galaxy*, its biggest game to date, shows just how determined it is to maintain its newly dominant position.

Although many aspects of *Rogue Galaxy*'s gameplay will be familiar to Level 5 veterans, the setting isn't. A lavish space opera, it sets the hallmark cel-shaded characters against futuristic jungles and opulent space ports as it tells the tale of Jester, a young hunter who, through a classic case of mistaken identity, gets whisked away from his humdrum life to become a space pirate. From there, the game unfolds like an origami fortune teller as Level 5 tucks inventive treats under every familiar piece of the RPG structure.

Battles are active, and you'll usually fight with two allies, swapping between them at the press of a button. Your friends can be assigned tactics on the fly, and they'll shout out for permission before using a potion or launching a costly spell. Overuse your meleé weapon and you'll have to rely on your ranged attacks as it powers up again. These weapons are almost limitlessly upgradable, growing stronger through use until they're ready to be fed into a 'synthetic oven' – which, this being Level 5, is a friendly purple frog – and combined into something new and deadlier.

And from that start, everything only gets more complex. As well as taking advantage of the weapon-frog, players will also be able to run a factory, making and selling new items according to recipes gleaned from NPCs. Each character's abilities can be enhanced by adding rare items into an upgrade tree. Even changing your equipment can have far-reaching effects, since tweaking your accessories can alter your entire appearance. And that's before you get to the insect battling (see 'Eeenie Mushi Mo').

Level 5's skill has always been in being able to slot together these elaborate systems in a way that seems amiable and relaxed, rather than daunting and overwhelming, and it seems that it's sustained that approach with *Rogue Galaxy*. Free-thinking, visually striking and full of character, it's a game that seems well able to fulfil Sony's hope of creating a new and durable brand. Five years ago, launching as an RPG specialist into a densely overcrowded market dominated by such ferocious dinosaurs as *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* must have seemed like quite a risk. Not any more.



### Eeenie Mushi Mo

*Dark Cloud 2* had Spheda, a golf minigame ranging across its dungeons. *Rogue Galaxy* has a turn-based insect battler. As you travel across the galaxy you can collect and rear insects before taking them into battle, five at a time, against other players you meet as you go. Each has its own unique abilities, and managing your strategy is crucial if you hope to win. One part chess, one part *Mushi Kings* and one part Pokémon, it's hard to imagine it not proving a hit.

Despite *Rogue Galaxy*'s visual richness, it seems that Level 5 has achieved its ambition of creating a game with no loading times, other than on startup or when 'zooming' from place to place







# Untold Legends: The Warrior's Code

**It's early days for PSP sequels, but the brothers of the blade are back to show what a difference a year makes**

It was more a case of unsung hero than untold legend for SOE's first foray into PSP RPGs. One of the strongest selling of the US launch games, its blend of dungeon crawling, item collecting and cooperative battling brought an old idea to a new, handheld environment with appropriate freshness. This update feels very much a second-generation title: slicker, grander and fully online.

The basic framework remains: pick a character type, this time from a new and less familiar selection of fighters, and then guide their growth by harvesting XP from monsters, hoarding new items, plugging powerful jewels into weapons and armour slots, and levelling up attributes and special attacks. The heroes this time around are changelings, persecuted for their ability to morph into monsters, but therefore also blessed with a brute-force battle alternative, complete with huge claws and thick skins.

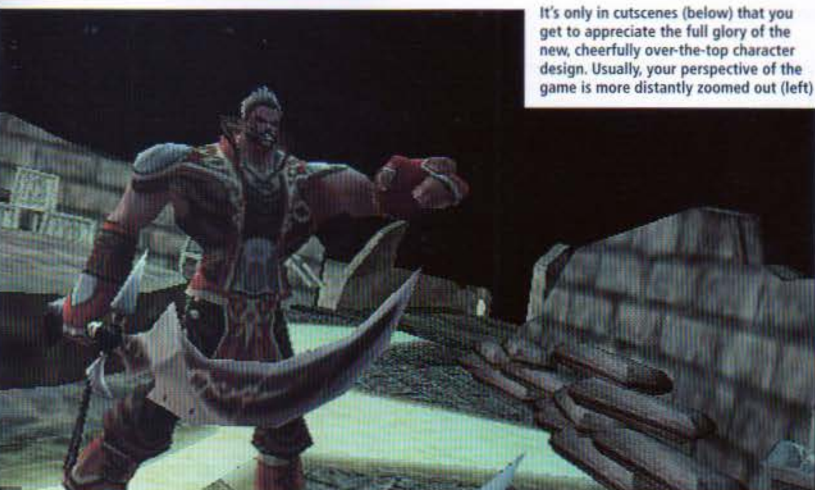
The dungeons they fight in are more elaborate and detailed than in the first game, and the top-down camera can be zoomed in and out to a greater degree depending on whether you want to enjoy the brawling close-up or take in the atmosphere from a more tactical remove. No longer randomly generated, there are more interesting layouts to enjoy as you explore, but it's also harder to forgive the more repetitive, strung-out sections when you know they're deliberate rather than an algorithmic accident.

The interface has been considerably overhauled, speeding up the process of inventory management and simplifying skills upgrades. And, improved from the somewhat unreliable pleasures of the first game, *The Warrior's Code* offers full online play, both cooperative and fourplayer competitive. The latter, due to the new character types and the new special attacks and beast-form moves, could prove a satisfying tactical challenge, although there isn't yet any final information about the game modes that will be available. Improved quick-chat menus – interconnecting circles of commonly needed text like 'help' or 'follow' – mean communication in battle can be handled with a couple of quick presses of the D-pad. Indeed, the whole control system for launching special attacks, using potions and swapping from meleé to ranged weapons has been very satisfactorily streamlined.

*Untold Legends* has yet to have the impact in Europe and Japan that it has enjoyed at home, no doubt partly because it offers a style of gaming which has always been close to American hearts. This more modern take is bound to extend its appeal, as well as likely prove a backbone of the PSP's online community.




It's only in cutscenes (below) that you get to appreciate the full glory of the new, cheerfully over-the-top character design. Usually, your perspective of the game is more distantly zoomed out (left)






The creatures into which you transform (above and top) are grotesque but powerful, and so their use is limited: pick-ups dropped by fallen foes sustain your altered form

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **SOE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH**




**From rotten to fabled**

*Untold Legends'* huge range of items is a big part of the game's appeal, unleashing your inner jackdaw as you scour the ground for the shiny glint of better items. Despite basic colour coding, the naming convention of items (worn, woven, racked, threadbare, staunch, etc) can make it hard to get to grips with. Shopping could also benefit from an overhaul, as keeping track of your funds and making comparisons between equipped items and potential purchases is rather clumsy.




Unsurprisingly, the New York of EA's *Godfather* is more flammable than that of either book or movie. The publisher will no doubt insist that it shows great restraint when compared to *Burnout*

What was described as a game focused upon consequences when we covered it last has adopted a somewhat lenient attitude towards those that wreak havoc upon its streets

# The Godfather: The Game

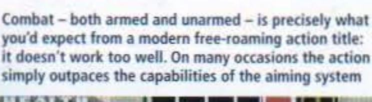
**EA rises to a new challenge with some old ideas. But can familiarity breed respect?**

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E148**

The major concerns with EA's *The Godfather* have always involved artistic licence. How, for example, can it furnish the movie's existing storyline – one seen by many as an incontestable resident of cinema's top five – with the adolescent distractions of a *GTA* derivative? How, also, does it manufacture a more significant role for the player than that of the unspoken stooge without clattering into the existing, delicate network of character relationships and agendas? The game's latest build suggests surprisingly simple answers and various degrees of success.

Key to its approach is the suggestion (in both book and film) that the Corleone family extends beyond Mario Puzo's narrative into grey areas that a hitherto-unseen character could easily fill, thus standing at the sidelines of an otherwise untouched tale. There's a limit to how convincing this can be – the sight of your character peering over an outside window ledge like some Sicilian Chad while Luca Brasi breathes his last is one less successful example – but it's at least interesting to watch this creative dilemma being tackled, and the results are seldom as blasphemous as you'd expect.

Between the cutscenes and mission setups, however, the game succumbs to both its formula and its publisher's maxim of efficiency. *The Godfather*'s sandbox is a convenient kludge of existing systems and designs, a convenient plug for the free-roaming hole in EA's portfolio, and by extension a convenient betrayal of its source. That first Road Rage Execution plaudit as you swing your car recklessly through street furniture makes EA's target audience clear, and if you relished the manner in which the uncomfortable diplomacy of Vito Corleone and the unnatural pacifism of son Michael collapsed following a painstaking dramatic setup, then that audience probably isn't you.


Combat – both armed and unarmed – is precisely what you'd expect from a modern free-roaming action title: it doesn't work too well. On many occasions the action simply outpaces the capabilities of the aiming system







The difference between a Game Face (the kind worn by avatars in the *Tiger Woods* series) and a Mob Face is only skin deep: the creative processes involved are identical

Seemingly afraid to alienate anyone, *The Godfather* has replicated too much *GTAIII* and filtered too little. While *Mafia* – certainly not the greatest of games – at least imposed limits on its players' behaviour to keep its action consistent with its theme, little is offered here beyond a cursory, statistical slap on the wrist for those who merrily mow and blast their way to mission objectives. Extortions are similarly crude, an analogue melee system shifting the emphasis of combat from murder to mere intimidation. But judicious selection of one attack over another is never – at this early stage – enforced or encouraged. The only challenge is to beat a character to a predefined point on a sliding scale, at which point their wealth or wisdom is assimilated into your vast databank.

*The Godfather* needs to achieve consistency between what you observe and what you play – between cutscenes that honour their subject matter and intervening stretches of action that, right now, do not. Though first impressions are of grubbily dressed interiors and chaotic controls, enough persistent stats – including relations between families, revenue streams and territorial police reputation – are monitored to suggest an embryonic strategic model that may yet blossom into something meaningful, if not entirely respectful.

**The eyes have it**

When as many licensed characters and personalities pass through your doors as fly through EA's, it helps to be good with faces. The company's unerring in-house focus on outward appearances – avatars, especially – rather than underlying design is an unapologetic marketing policy that hasn't gone unnoticed by gamers, but from the necks of its characters up, *The Godfather* shows that such efforts aren't completely without purpose or reward. No standard of vocal dub (especially those of actors several decades older than their on-screen alter egos) will turn a ragdoll into a synthespian, and EA's recognition of this can be seen in the eyes of its cast, ocular animations crowning a wide array of believable expressions, and seldom lapsing into zombie stares.

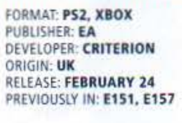






Replay value will hopefully be added by sub-objectives, all of which will improve the player's rating. As well as the primary and secondary goals, the player can aim for side-goals, based on Recon, Armament, Intel and Blackmail, though it's unclear how these work





FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 24**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E157**

# Black

## Criterion's firstperson shooter continues to burn brightly, although it can't help but feel slightly dim

For a game so much about an overdose of pyrotechnics, this latest stage we've seen from *Black* – the Treneska border crossing – feels more dinosaur than dynamite in its opening moments. It begins in a thick forest, packed with foliage but not intrusively so, shafts of hazy light breaking through the canopy and the odd mote bobbing through the air in what makes for a surprisingly pretty scene. There are few enemies to be found, a lot of ground to tread and nothing to blow up; it's not that far removed from the dreary climes of *Perfect Dark Zero*'s jungle stage.

Those cold feet soon turn to warm hands, though, as that relatively peaceful ramble through the forest reaches a border facility. And things begin to look up, literally, as you put some AK-47 rounds into one of the large fuel tanks scattered around, and rubberneck the thunderous explosion as it takes out a nearby hut in a destructive show of primal pizzazz. That initial hesitation is short-lived, as short-lived as the enemy patrol that decides to take up cover a little too close to another gas tank. It's hard to decide whether there's any clever AI in your opponents, since their presence is so fleeting – and they're all identical – but those toting shotguns and wearing body armour prove to be dangerous.

With the entire facility razed by umpteen blasts and many short, sharp gun battles, the wake of it all can only be described as apocalyptic, with lines of fat bullet holes, patches of fire, gutted buildings with smashed windows, and porches reduced to splinters. The environmental damage is localised and limited, and only certain chunks of the game world can be ruined, but the effect, both during gunfights and after, is convincing. Even collections of crates and other traditionally immovable props get cut down in a pleasing mess. Everything man-made gets gun-unmade, and there's an urge to shoot absolutely everything, just for the primitive enjoyment of seeing it all detonate.

These impressions come from just one level, but it points to a game that's shaping up to be fine action-movie indulgence – don't skimp on the ammo, just viciously spray everything until it makes with the loud and pretty – a thrill for the senses, buffered by some raucous audio design. There seems little strategy and there's no jump or use button – and the prime tactical concern is one of sticking as close to the explosions as possible. And the obvious question is whether that spark will fizzle out before reaching whatever suitably explosive climax *Black* likely has in store.

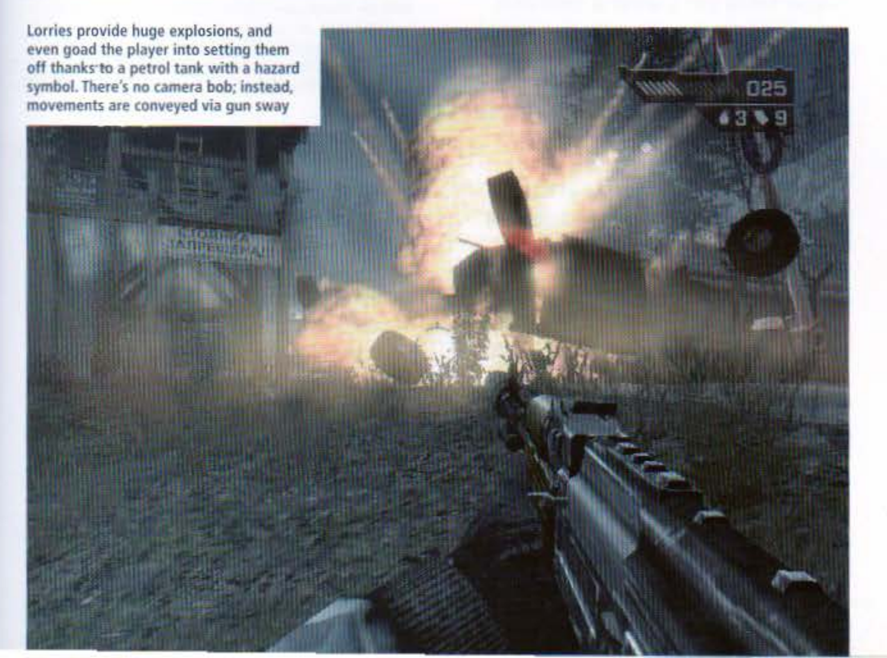
Plenty of objects – fallen tree trunks, bannisters, walls and the like – can be chipped away, robbing enemies of cover in a gratifying manner, and avoiding the need for picky, meticulous shootouts. The lack of a jump button, though, can lead to the occasional clumsy moment



**Arsenal fans**

If *Black* is deserving of its 'gun porn' nickname, then its lead actors seem to be happy with the missionary position. Three weapons appear in the Treneska border stage – a pistol, an AK-47 and a SPAS shotgun. It might be a standard line-up, but each feels hefty and accurate. The AK-47 proves to be the most versatile and, like the pistol, has an option to attach a silencer. There's also the possibility of switching from automatic to semi-auto or single shot, likely for some stealthy recon goals. The typical two-gun limit is in effect, but it doesn't appear to be much of a tactical choice, simply because the violence on offer is so abundant and indiscriminate.

Lorries provide huge explosions, and even goad the player into setting them off thanks to a petrol tank with a hazard symbol. There's no camera bob; instead, movements are conveyed via gun sway



FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **MOON BYTE STUDIOS, REPLAY STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **GERMANY**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 24**

# Crashday

**Having dodged the console market, can Atari's latest stunt car racer steer itself clear of a creative dead end?**




Vehicles can be upgraded with a mixture of commonplace and unusual tuning options, upgrades affecting performance, appearance and battle readiness. Both the root categories and their component options boast a high degree of simplicity

*Stunts*, the 1990 customisable racer by Distinctive Software (later to become EA Canada) that will be recognised in Europe as part of the 4D Sports range, has already had one spiritual successor. By striking a similar balance of arcade simplicity, cutting-edge looks and PC-powered extensibility, *TrackMania* captured that specific genre's online community of racers and designers. *Crashday*, by German studios Moon Byte and Replay, is gunning for a slice of that audience, and now that its PS2 and Xbox versions have seemingly crashed out of development, it's especially important that it gets it.

Unfortunately, most of what we've seen (and, admittedly, much remains locked away in various states of completion) suffers a visual sterility that afflicts many a PC action title. *Crashday* is too precise in its destruction and too devoid of a unifying aesthetic to suggest any real pandemonium; a visual filter or two would do much to bind its environments, actors and effects into a more convincing whole. The look isn't entirely unsuitable, the game offering as much a crash laboratory as a competition where purposefully barren tracks suggest configurability rather than fixed design, but it's something that *TrackMania* notably managed to avoid.

The game's current build imposes a strict limit on our appraisal – its AI is rudimentary at best and its tracks sparse. There certainly isn't a shortage of modes – armed races are the most conventional while more extreme examples include Pass The Bomb (an explosive game of tag) and variations of Capture The Flag – but what's offered therein can be surprisingly mundane. The Stunt Show mode and accompanying track editor hold greater promise, but are also impeded by an overall lack of substance. It's an unenviable position to find yourself in: juggled between dates and formats by a publisher that arguably has too many driving smash 'em ups in its catalogue. And just as you can't help but imagine *Crashday* being shunted onto its single format trajectory by the more bankable *Driver: Parallel Lines*, you have to wonder just who'll be waiting for it at its destination.








Strategy in *Crashday*'s current build involves little more than the genre 101, AI derby cars driving a short distance from the competition before turning round and ploughing back in. Victory requires little more than following suit





# Rogue Trooper

**The barren wastes of Nu-Earth finally surrender Rebellion's second, refurbished 2000AD title**

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **REBELLION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q2**

Rebellion is especially proud of the game's new skybox, depicting as it does the iconic wormhole that hangs above Nu-Earth's desolate surface and scorched skies. It's certainly a break from the norm

Perhaps it's only right that when a developer called Rebellion turns a property like Rogue Trooper into a videogame, that game goes AWOL for a while. Having announced the title in 2004 following the enormously belated US release of the faithful, creative but otherwise average *Dredd Vs Death*, the Oxford-based company fell quiet on its futuristic front. The fear for spectators was that the financial strain of buying the lock, stock and barrel of 2000AD was crippling its ability to explore the brand's multimedia potential, projects such as dual Judge Dredd movies and Trooper falling into shadow as other titles came and went. But now, with the schedules clear and expectations muted, the galaxy's least predictable (not to mention last remaining) genetic infantryman has reported back in. The question is: how's he been spending those wilderness months?

Rebuilt since its appearance at E3, *Trooper* is looking familiar and yet fortified, its grounding in Rebellion's Asura engine meaning that it's as dead a ringer for its source material as three dimensions will allow. If the contributions of famed 2000AD scribe Gordon Rennie fulfil their potential, and if the quality of audio design can be assumed to match that of *Dredd Vs Death*, then its authenticity is more or less assured. Mechanically, the game's thirdperson combination of action and stealth appears to be integrating the kinds of cover and blind-fire systems that the modern genre demands, while a new salvage system seeks to establish a strategic core for its distribution of ammo. A fourplayer coop mode has been confirmed (players controlling Rogue, together with pre-death versions of his aides Helm, Bagman and Gunnar), and fans will relish the inclusion of the Quartz Zone Massacre as a multiplayer map.

Rebellion remains a great ideas factory – *Black Hawk Down* aside – and while some of its vehicles for those ideas have been dubious, it's important to remember that others include the first PC version of *Alien Vs Predator* and *Sniper Elite*. If *Rogue Trooper*'s mission is to secure a reputation in flux, then few would begrudge its success.






With the stealth genre having explored every last avenue available to it, the question to ask of *Trooper*'s design isn't so much *what* it does as how well it does it. Clever use of Rogue's bio-chip colleagues during these moments should, at the very least, make them satisfyingly different





The oddness of the blocking system is particularly obvious during duels, where its use is crucial. The couple of hits you take as you raise your guard are compensated for by the way it knocks your opponent off-balance



# Key Of Heaven

## An action-RPG with a Zen approach to swordplay. Can you hear the sound of one button bashing?

It's taken a while to for Sony to bring *Tenchi No Mon* to the west, presumably partly because it was debating the name. Known as *Kingdom Of Paradise* in the US, Europeans are to be offered the rather more pocket-sized *Key Of Heaven* when the game arrives here.

It's a name that promises a lot, and there's no doubt the game has ambition to match. Its sweeping story sets up a mystical land dominated by five clans, each with their own martial art, and hands the hero Shinbu – rather inevitably living in exile after flaunting his teacher's rules – the task of avenging the very people who made him an outcast when his clan leaders are murdered by a rival house. The world is lavishly presented, with the fixed camera allowing for dense detail that acts as an apt backdrop for the game's main focus: swordplay. Shinbu and his companions are frequently beset by enemies who stream in from offscreen, and he must learn new skills as he travels if he's to survive.

The odd contradiction at the heart of *Key Of Heaven* is that despite the emphasis on fighting, and despite the hundreds of attack moves and combos you can pull off, there is only one action button. The shoulder button toggles you between selected attack patterns, and hammering the attack button unleashes the chosen sequence. Each move within each sequence is a discrete button press, so there's some skill to be found in knowing when to pause or restart a combo, and in choosing and building the sequences in the first place (see 'Building blocks'). Odder still is that this same button is also used for block. If held down, you're required to suffer a couple of hits before getting a chance to raise your guard and be given an opportunity to counter. It's clearly a deliberate choice, but it's peculiar and unsatisfying.

There's a strong argument for making titles like this accessible, rather than requiring the memorisation of exhaustive and exhausting combo commands, but it leaves the game with a stiff challenge of making combat feel continuingly involving rather than simply repetitive. It's not a challenge made any easier by the A-to-B nature of many of the quests, or the rather uncharismatic nature of the storytelling – which itself is hampered by some pretty dreadful voice acting. Nonetheless, the beauty of the settings and the drama of the swordplay make it an engaging enough title, even if it doesn't prove able to live up to the promise of its title.



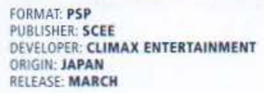
As well as the combos that you can create from the moves you find, Shinbu also has a special 'chi' attack. This deals wide-ranging damage, and can be quickly replenished by holding down the charge button for a couple of seconds







Although the English voice acting – and indeed the whole story – is rather on the hammy side, the European version gives you the choice of sticking with the original Japanese voicing and relying instead on subtitles



FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **CLIMAX ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH**



### Building blocks

Attacks are formed by individual moves, which exist as tokens which can be found in the world. Once located, they can be placed in differing scrolls (which must also be found), to create and customise the combo sequences that make up your arsenal. These can then be selected via the R button. It sounds complicated, but it's really a simple innovation. In *Key Of Heaven*, the collectables are attacks. The more you find, the cooler your moves become. It does a fantastic job of integrating item collecting into the heart of the gameplay, and is the game's strongest element.



Boss fights punctuate the brawling, and can crop up rather unexpectedly. Although you can save whenever you like, there's no autosave, leaving you vulnerable to your own forgetfulness

FORMAT: **PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **TRI-ACE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SILMERIA: 2006 (JPN), TBA (UK); LENNETH: MARCH 2 (JPN)**

# Valkyrie Profile Silmeria/Lenneth

The PS2 could ask for no better exit than an escort to Valhalla with tri-Ace's legendary title



*Silmeria*'s backdrops are so lush that some Jump Festa attendees confused them for prerendered visuals. Fixed viewing angles allow the artists to fill what's visible with depth and colour

The return of *Valkyrie Profile* is news to be greeted with either shellshocked gratitude or a blank shrug, and few reactions in between. Most of those who experienced the 1999 PlayStation original have been holding a torch for the game ever since; others who missed it – and if you were in a PAL territory without access to importing, you had little choice in the matter – have likely never seen its idiosyncratic design reflected elsewhere.

A side-scrolling 2D action-RPG, the game followed one of the titular Norse warrior-maidens (or at least a Japanese game designer's approximation) charged with recruiting doomed heroes, training them in battle, and sending them on to Valhalla. A generally well-judged combination of narrative pathos and flashy combo action found commercial success in Japan and a cult following in the US, making the six-year gap between episodes all the more surprising.




Lead character Alicia is royal, but not divine – that falls to the valkyrie soul bound inside her, Silmeria. We're hoping this casting doesn't make for too tortuous a narrative

It's perhaps explained in a similar fashion to Level 5's recent *Rogue Galaxy* channeling that developer's rise from *Dark Cloud* to *Dragon Quest VIII*. With *Star Ocean 3*, *Grandia 3* and *Radiata Stories* under its PS2 belt, tri-Ace has built the confidence to close a productive generation with *Valkyrie Profile Silmeria*. Tellingly, it's not *VP2*: Ragnarok only comes around once, after all, and the developer felt its story was satisfactorily concluded. *Silmeria* is instead a prelude, a standalone title reinforced by fan-pleasing retreads of familiar but changed locations.

Gameplay seems equally familiar, as the expected switch to 3D unexpectedly supports a 2.5D world – happily, the original's disorienting structure of stacked dungeon layers accessed by running into, or out of, the screen is now portrayed with smooth camera pans. Combat, in which each face button launches an attack from the corresponding party member, has also been retained. Additional rain-of-damage-numbers abilities are expected, along with other side-systems, but *VP*'s fundamental structure remains unique to the point that *Silmeria* could ape it wholesale and still feel fresh.

In the interests of jogging Japanese gamers' memories and wallets, a rerelease of the original *Valkyrie Profile Lenneth* on PSP will appear before *Silmeria*. At first thought to be a remake, *Lenneth* has turned out to be an enhanced port, only adding newly recorded voice acting and new CG sequences (which replace talking-heads exposition, at the cost of the remarkable artwork for those heads). Though its visuals will be put in their best light by the PSP's screen, it's unlikely to find a western release. *Silmeria*, however, could benefit from Ubisoft and Square Enix's European arrangement, and add yet another accomplished JRPG to an already star-studded farewell year for the PS2.



*Lenneth* appears to have been reformatted for the PSP's aspect ratio, as opposed to other 2D ports on the platform that resample their visuals with a bleary, stretched result








The *Valkyrie Profile* combat system – made up of one part turn-based strategising, one part feint-and-strike fighting game and the rest sound, fury and battering gems out of enemies – seems to have made the generational jump intact



## Brand new retro

Just as the GBA provided a second, portable life for 8- and 16bit JRPG classics, the PSP is becoming a destination for 32bit titles. Atlus' Saturn gems *Princess Crown* and *Shin Megami Tensei* have already been ported, and Konami has scheduled a *Suikoden 1&2* collection for the week before *Lenneth*'s release. Western gamers hoping to play such titles without paying for the originals' eBay mark-ups will have to do it with a translation FAQ in hand, however.







The action benefits from analogue target switching, precise aiming, efficient inventory management and cover use, but combat succumbs to messiness during fierce bouts

# 24: The Game

## Jumping from one form of realtime to another, can agent Jack Bauer make the best of another bad day in LA?

Given that there's probably nothing in it, perhaps it's best not to dwell on the revival of 'The Game' as a suffix for tie-ins. But with both The Godfather and 24 adaptations now monikered accordingly, you have to wonder whether the title is being chosen or enforced. Are the owners of these pre-eminent dramas cautiously fencing off such interactive episodes from their established canons? Considering *Without Warning* – the opportunist pretender that achieved nothing beyond mimicry of 24's style, mockery of its gravitas and misery for its audience – it wouldn't be entirely surprising if they were.

Just as we have to go back in time to appreciate *24: The Game*'s place amidst series events (it's positioned between TV seasons two and three), we have to travel further still to appreciate its dated yet charming mode of adaptation. This is how tie-ins used to be made, back when the one suitable approach to a movie or TV show was a multi-genre compendium. The game's eclecticism goes beyond the convenient engine harvesting and inconsequential pop-up puzzles of, say, *Batman Begins* or a recent Bond. What we've seen of its 100 levels suggests series hallmarks transposed into the style of game that suits them best, threaded together by thirdperson gunplay, driving and, of course, an intricately woven plot.

It's a diversity best explained by an outline of the game's opening three hours. A dockside siege (action), a bomb disarm (puzzle), an escape (more action), a chase (by car and on foot), an infiltration (stealth), an interrogation (a novel and well-executed timing challenge), a satellite imaging analysis (another puzzle) and a sniping turkey shoot comprise its levels. Novelty clearly takes priority over depth and the game feels disposable, but Studio Cambridge has done an admirable job of masking its throwaway nature. Every level quantifies your performance, be it the number of moves it takes to bypass a circuit or the number of enemies subdued rather than killed, offering plenty for those who like to feast on stats and tallying those percentages into one persistent grade. But that opening issue remains: how qualified an adaptation is it?

For the game's dominant audience – the series fans looking for a convincing daytrip into Jack Bauer's unenviable calendar – the most important values will be those of production rather than player performance. In this regard, *24* aims high and hits its mark, albeit not consistently. Its environments paint the Los Angeles Basin with the same smoggy hue you see in the TV show, its characters are proficiently modelled and its challenges are graced with sophisticated sheen. The game hasn't overlooked the finer points of the action it's emulating, either, but there's still work to be done. Authoritative warnings, commands and hails provide the backbone of a shoot-to-wound policy that honours the series' deductive themes, but they presently tend to decorate the action rather than infuse it with the intended drama. *24* is an evocative distraction; hopefully there's still time to address its flaws.



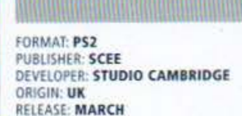
Pyrotechnic events, synchronous scenes in separate places and enemy vantage points all feature in the game's inevitable splitscreen sequences. Though they crop up frequently during cutscenes, these moments also occur during play, sometimes acting as multi-angle cameras that help pinpoint targets and strategies




Despite the fireworks elsewhere, the interrogation level is this preview version's highlight – an elaborate timing challenge that works far better than you'd expect, with Sutherland providing a few verbal explosions of his own

Character models range from the uncanny to the unrecognisable, with high-detail cutscenes played back as PS2-friendly FMV. Voice acting covers a wider quality range, Sutherland bringing Bauer to boiling point with all the professionalism you'd expect, the incidental dialogue of enemies demonstrating none whatsoever





FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **STUDIO CAMBRIDGE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **MARCH**



### Terrorism-counter

**Though game duration is an ever-popular interview question, a precise answer rarely exists. *24: The Game* unquestionably suffers from its inability to impose the kind of strict timeline on events that its non-interactive sibling can. Its perfectly typeset clockface and accompanying audio are convincing devices, but a capable gamer can still undermine the illusion by speeding through its time-limited levels. Perhaps with some refinement it'll become possible to surrender more readily to the game's depicted timeframe. The continuity of its story (set in motion by a ricin bomb discovery, a thwarted assassination attempt and the revelation, of course, of a terrorist conspiracy) has clearly received a lot of attention and the adherence to the series' style is exceptional.**

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 16 (JPN), TBA (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E132, E138**

# Final Fantasy XII

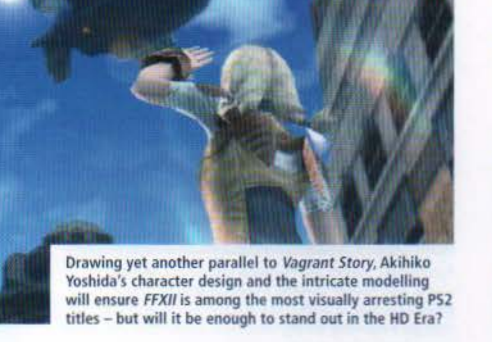
## When Square Enix holds an event to announce a release date, it can only be the very-nearly-Final Fantasy

At E3 2004, *FFXII*'s driven, mathematical project lead Yasumi Matsuno confided to us that if his game was released on time and with 80 per cent of his vision intact, he would be happy. When the game reaches Japanese stores on March 16, it will be almost two years late; Matsuno, rumoured to have been hospitalised for exhaustion during the extended development, has not been directly involved for one of them (or, apparently, even working at Square Enix).

But handing the reins of Square's most populist blockbuster to its most indie director was never guaranteed to go smoothly, especially with its reinvention as a seamless, branching 'offline online RPG'. Now, *FFXII* seems even more like an unofficial sequel to *Vagrant Story* – arriving in its system's last days as a glorious clash of ambition with hardware limitation. There are far worse titles with which to be compared, though, and it's backhanded consolation that Square Enix has repeatedly chosen to delay, rather than hurriedly finish, its troubled crown jewel.

The company obviously intends to recoup as much of those development costs as possible with a premium pricepoint of ¥8,990 (£45), and the release of a deluxe CD-single of the game's theme played by classical violinist Taro Hakase. In a reverse product-placement twist, foodstuff and beverage giant Suntory will launch a game-inspired soft drink, FFXII Potion, in Japanese convenience stores in March. Potion's price is undetermined, but like the game itself will be 'more expensive than usual'.

No plans were announced for a similarly lavish western blowout, but at this stage a speedy and faithful localisation would be enough – and the hope that Matsuno still has something to be happy about.



Drawing yet another parallel to *Vagrant Story*, Akihiko Yoshida's character design and the intricate modelling will ensure *FFXII* is among the most visually arresting PS2 titles – but will it be enough to stand out in the HD Era?







It wouldn't be a post-*FFVII Final Fantasy* without parades and airship battles, but *FFXII*'s FMV sequences were likely finished long before the game itself was. The in-game cinematics concern themselves with more intimate moments, and should feel more familiar to Matsuno fans



FORMAT: **COIN-OP**
MANUFACTURER: **TAITO**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006 (JPN)**

# Half-Life 2: Survivor

## It might be the right game in the wrong place, but Mr Freeman is about to wake up and smell the arcades

Few arcade games make their initial **Edge** appearance in an Out There column, but *Survivor* is a unique case. It's still unclear why Taito has seized on a genre to which Japanese gamers still remain infamously averse, or why *HL2*'s downbeat totalitarianism was considered ripe for arcade conversion, but it's obvious the manufacturer has spared few expenses in realising its curious vision.

Unlike Namco's previous attempt to break *Counter-Strike* into the arcades with a dedicated PC setup, *Survivor* features a sit-in cabinet with six surround speakers, a 32-inch screen, two controllers and two foot pedals. In a luxury twin-analogue control model, the right-hand joystick is used for aiming and firing weapons (a mousewheel equivalent allows switching), and the left for movement; the pedals control jumping and crouching. It seems mouse-and-keyboard veterans will initially be sharing the nation's sense of FPS disorientation.

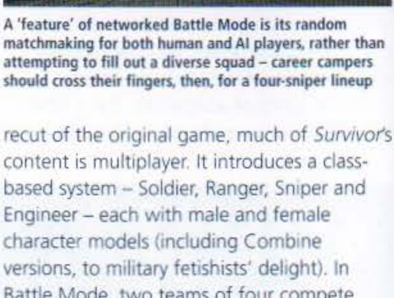
While Street Mode offers a ten-chapter recut of the original game, much of *Survivor*'s content is multiplayer. It introduces a class-based system – Soldier, Ranger, Sniper and Engineer – each with male and female character models (including Combine versions, to military fetishists' delight). In Battle Mode, two teams of four compete over the game's network, with AI-controlled support filling in for holes in the ranks. Mission Mode is a cooperative experience for a fourplayer squad, and clearing its multi-objective stages unlocks further missions and upgrades to save on IC card.

Gunplay was one of *HL2*'s lesser advances, but *Survivor*'s multiplayer tweaks could enliven it – and given its hardware's direct PC makeup, there's the possibility for it to be Steam's first arcade-to-home port.



Arcade adaptation has called for significant changes and 'improvements' to *Half-Life 2*'s singleplayer campaign





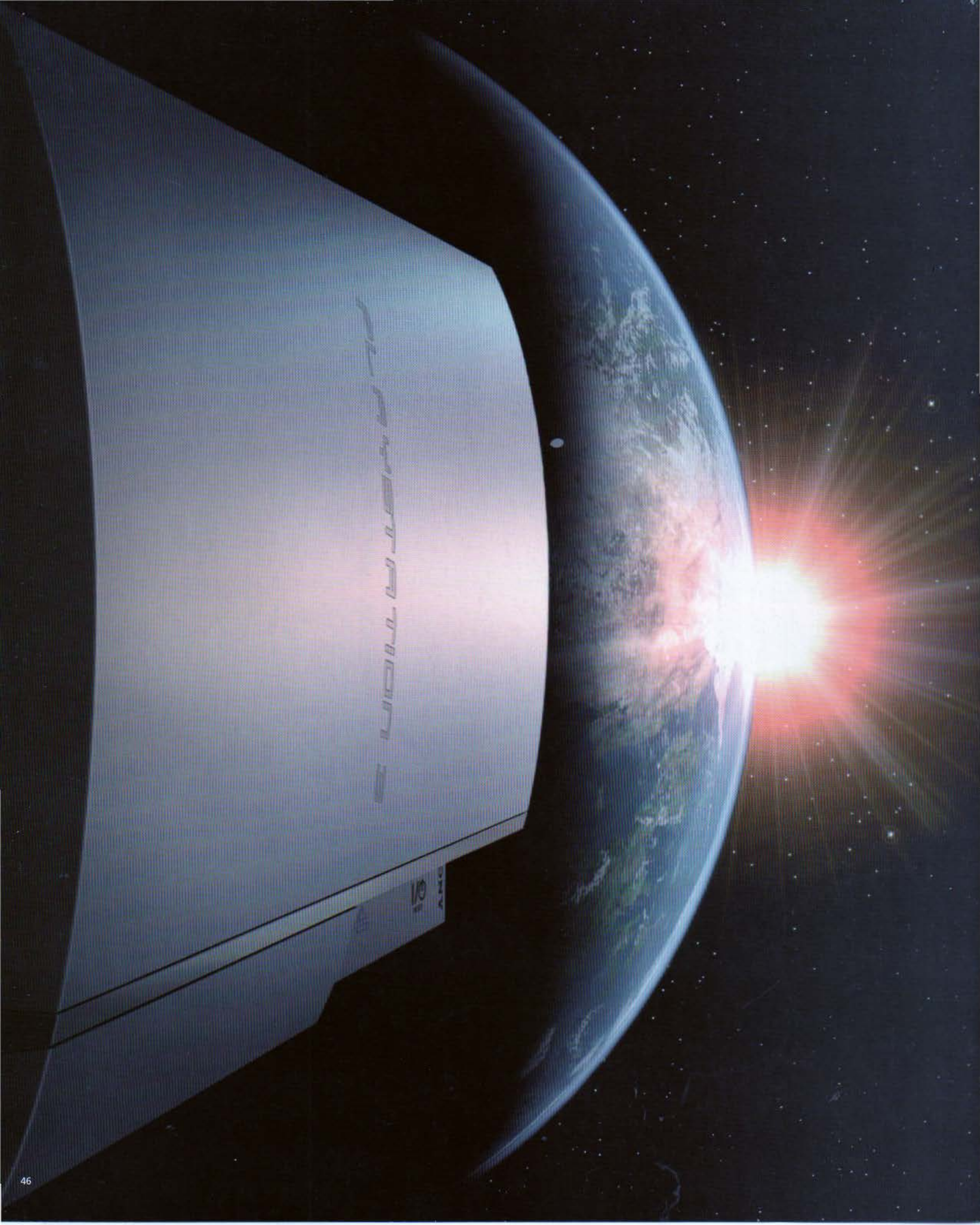
A 'feature' of networked Battle Mode is its random matchmaking for both human and AI players, rather than attempting to fill out a diverse squad – career campers should cross their fingers, then, for a four-sniper lineup








*Survivor*'s Battle Mode radar can prove a source of additional tension as opposing colours converge on you. The Gravity Gun is present, but oddly underplayed in promo material: we expect those two standbys of *HL2* deathmatch, toilets and filing cabinets, to appeal globally



# PlayStation 3 versus the world

## Blu-ray, HD-DVD, 1,080i, 1080p, HD, 'True HD', online... The next-gen universe is a complex one. How, then, is Sony preparing to conquer it?

No videogame console manufacturer has ever dominated its industry for three successive generations. Once, it seemed that Nintendo might achieve such a feat, having conquered Japan and the US with its NES and then squeezed a victory over Sega in the 16bit race. But then the rules changed. Then the videogame industry changed. Then it wasn't just about who had the most attractive IP but who could deliver 'interactive entertainment' on shiny CDs, and who could package it up and market it to people who'd either forgotten why games are great or hadn't realised it in the first place. Then, in other words, it was time for Sony.

What's happened since has been chronicled at length. What's about to happen with the launch of PS3, going up against some proven hardware from Microsoft and Nintendo's bravest console yet in the form of Revolution (Virtual Boy doesn't count – it wasn't brave, just silly), is the next part of the story, beginning here with a point-by-point look at just how well equipped Sony is to reach that elusive goal – and how well its rivals are positioned to challenge it.

## TECHNOLOGY (PART ONE)

The starting point for this discussion has to be technology in terms of processing power (rather than technology at the edges or outside of the box), because it's where all of the players have focused so much attention to date – Sony and Microsoft in a predictably ugly, head-to-head face-off, and Nintendo by dramatically pronouncing that it really has had enough of playing the numbers game and no longer wants to be counted in when such things are reckoned up.

Power is of chief importance to two groups: developers and hobbyist consumers. Publishers mostly don't care about such issues, and nor do those less-committed consumers – that's 90-something per cent of all gamers – who couldn't, from looks alone, tell the difference between an average PS2 game and a well-implemented Xbox game.

**"The challenge is to unlock the PS3's potential – so far, 360 is proving to be easier to code for"**



PS3 will ship with Blu-ray compatibility as standard. Hollywood is already making exciteable noises over the format (see the special Blu-ray movie disc packaging above), and Sony expects the gaming world to follow suit. Microsoft, meanwhile, is lining up a 360 HD-DVD add-on for later this year

From a development perspective, staunch Microsoft supporters would have us believe that PS3 is, like its predecessor, an horrific piece of architecture: where PS2 tasked coders to build intimate relationships with its vector processing units in order to make the hardware really sing, PS3 has its never-before-seen, multiple-cored Cell CPU. Microsoft supporters will also point to XNA, the company's unified development environment that surpasses in scale anything Sony or Nintendo (or Sega, of course) has ever seen fit to even attempt, resulting in an efficiency of scheduling, implementation and bug fixing that meant such a big selection of 360 games was ready to roll at launch (without XNA there may have been only half as many; some might argue that not everything XNA brings to the table is necessarily a good thing). Sony has done much to address the consequences of these issues, partly by packing Epic's Unreal Engine 3 and Havok's and Ageia's middleware into the PS3 SDK, immediately removing two hurdles (rendering and physics) from the track for those who lack the expertise, time or budget to self-create. By identifying the value of and then simply buying up SN Systems, the most proven middleware name in the business alongside Criterion, Sony has taken a bolder step. Bristol-based SN, which has been providing developers in both the east and west with invaluable tools in place of nonexistent or, at best, poorly functioning equivalents from the likes of Sega, Nintendo and Sony itself since the early '90s, is a key part of the jigsaw: having its toolsets onboard as standard, rather than as optional extras, immediately makes PS3 development a more digestible prospect. SN's Tuner, for instance, is able to give PS3 developers an up-close view of how load is being distributed across the console's complex layout – a type of development aid that once made *Gran Turismo* look so much more advanced than every other PS1 game, but available on PS3 from day one.

So, where so many developers once perceived Sony's support to be something of a laughing matter – when they weren't crying over it – PS3 is simply a friendlier prospect. It remains no walk in the park – the architecture features a part-Sony-designed CPU with multiple cores – but certainly better use of the PS3 hardware's capacity will be made at an earlier point in its lifecycle than was the case with PS2.

It will need to be. Knowing that it may well come to market in certain territories anything up to a year after 360 has arrived (there is no date as yet for a Euro PS3 release, while a simultaneous or even near-simultaneous worldwide release is not being lined up), Sony has to deliver on its grandstanding at E3 2005. The environment in *Vision Gran Turismo* will need to look more believable than those in *Project Gotham Racing 3*. *Killzone 2*'s environmental effects will need to appear more real than those of *Call Of Duty 2*. PS3 *Tekken*'s characters will need to be more extravagantly detailed and animated with more vigour than the fighters who strut around *Dead Or Alive 4*. And, when these PS3 games arrive, 360 titles, at least the best of them, will look significantly better than the squeezed-out debut titles we saw at the end of 2005. Producing content that looks like it was worth the wait is the biggest challenge facing PS3 game developers.

**What's clear is** that, in the not-too-distant future, dual-format PS3/360 releases will be closer in terms of appearance than dual-format PS2/Xbox releases, not only because the respective consoles are more evenly matched – at least according to those developers working on both formats with whom we've spoken (sample quote: "In terms of graphics and audio the two machines are very close. When it comes to raw grunt, the PS3 is, on paper, more powerful. The challenge for us as developers is to unlock the potential of the PS3's eight processors – so far, 360 is proving to be easier to code for") – but because, as projects continue to grow in scale, it makes less and less sense to spend resources, which is to say time, money, expertise and more, on assets – of which there will typically be many times more than were required for previous-generation projects – for use in only one environment.

Which brings us to Revolution. While Nintendo would have us believe that its new console, despite operating on a different



From left: Epic's Unreal Engine 3 at work; Factor 5's *Lair*; Sega's *Fifth Phantom Saga*. Can you spot the code that hasn't been sympathetically written for the way Sony's new hardware functions?

level in terms of processing power, nevertheless lends itself to multiformat development just as much as 360 and PS3, there is little hope of seeing as many joint PS3/360/Revolution titles as there have been PS2/Xbox/GameCube productions – at least in the near term.

Right now, thanks to Nintendo's DS proving just how far a lot of innovation will go once the public has got its hands on it, many publishers are falling over themselves to consider options on at least a handful of dedicated Revolution titles, especially if they can be tied in to existing IP. Don't be surprised, therefore, to see a multitude of safe, 'party'-style games featuring characters you know and loathe popping up on the thirdparty roster for Nintendo's console. If Revolution's market opens up the way Nintendo expects and needs it to, brilliantly turning it into a PS3-rivalling success the way DS has gone up against PSP, publishers will no doubt begin building in aesthetically compromised Revolution versions alongside PS3 and 360 outings for future multiformat releases (replete with bonus sections that make 'full and exciting' use of the platform's unique controllers, naturally).

What can Revolution actually do? Certainly not widescreen hi-definition video, something 360 and PS3 use a great deal of computing muscle toiling over. Nintendo's new console is, contrary to its name, an evolution of its GameCube technology, utilising cheap, easy-to-engineer-and-program components which fail to push at boundaries and settle instead on delivering performance that is discernibly progressive but at the same time somewhat familiar. How much better, goes Nintendo's reckoning, does Mario, a cartoon-styled character with a simple, bold-hued outfit, need to look? It's a fair point. How much better does the next *Metroid Prime* need to look? The answer is said to be about on a par with what a dual-core-CPU PC running an X800 graphics card could manage.

## TECHNOLOGY (PART TWO)

If Sony hasn't got quite as dramatic a march on 360 as had been forecast in terms of what it can push to the screen, it nevertheless throws up other technological issues that leave Microsoft floundering. Rather than taking Nintendo's line and attacking the issue from a previously unexplored angle, though, Sony's efforts amount to going one louder than its most obvious competitor.

One of the clearest-cut advantages PS3 has over 360, and one that Sony was at pains to underline at CES in early January and will continue to press, is its support of 1,080p video output. It has seized upon 360's 1,080i limit with dogged resolve, in fact, going so far as to suggest that 1,080i does not even quality as hi-definition and officially terming 1,080p 'True HD'. And that's 'True HD' powered by Blu-ray (BD-ROM) media compared to 360's DVD capacity. Holding a maximum of 50Gb of data compared to DVD's 8.5Gb (dual-layer) and with a retrieval rate of 54Mb/s, Blu-ray has long been a hot topic for the entertainment industry as a whole, and with HD-DVD it will redefine the home cinema scene – again. The key for consumers in this? The first dedicated Blu-ray players will arrive later this year at over a thousand dollars. The Blu-ray-compatible PS3 will retail for a few hundred.

PS3 is, in other words, a truly future-proofed console where 360 is a product of today and for today. Microsoft's response? To announce a separate 360 optical drive compatible with the HD-DVD format (capacity: 30Gb). A big, expensive add-on announced less than a month after the console itself has gone on sale? It's not even something Sega would've attempted in the

PS3's Nvidia-designed RSX graphics architecture has attracted criticism from rival ATI, but it remains fearsomely potent silicon, as the detail in the realtime 'Luna' demo ably illustrates

crazy days of its 16bit hardware confusion. But Microsoft has positioned 360 as a true multimedia device, and it's clear that DVD as a storage medium is past its best when it comes to progressive digital entertainment applications. (Nintendo, meanwhile, has built DVD playback into Revolution.)

Moving around the back of the respective consoles, Sony's simultaneous video output via two HDMI ports is an option absent from Microsoft's solution. With PS3, goes the theory, you'll be able to elect to move particular graphical elements out of the way of the main action in certain games by simply syphoning it off of your LCD or plasma TV and on to your PC's monitor. On paper it seems an almost ridiculously luxurious setup; in reality, considering the ubiquity of home PCs, it's not an altogether out-there notion.

**Sony has also** thrown in support for seven wireless controllers, which is clearly not two better than 360 and Revolution but *three* better. It could have considered this particular Bluetooth application's bandwidth and smoothed it down to the much rounder six, but no: in each instance Sony feels the need to put as much ground between itself and its rivals as possible, even when such slightness of difference looks mildly comical.

It's obvious that coming to market after Microsoft has put Sony in an offensively defensive position. Crucially, it's not going up against the Microsoft it was four years ago, when the original Xbox launched, but a more learned outfit whose appreciation for what console gamers want – and what they do not want, or, perhaps worse, do not even care about – has only been discovered via cold, hard experience. As far as Nintendo goes, Sony has not reacted – yet.

Nintendo wants those who already play Nintendo games to keep playing Nintendo games. It also wants those who don't play games at all to play Nintendo games, a vast sector it aims to suck in with its Revolution controller solution, which it has come to term the 'Freehand'. We've used the controller with a selection of testbed applications and, even in this form, it works beautifully, just like some futuristic-looking gaming invention that might've once appeared on Tomorrow's World and never made it beyond prototype stage.

So the Revolution controller's functionality cannot be questioned. Its actual application, however, begs nothing *but* questions. How, for example, will it be calibrated for those lacking in hand-eye coordination? It's all very well suggesting that a Revolution game might simulate baseball in your living room, but how does that relate to those who've never been able to thwack a ball in real life? Will they be patronised by built-in compensations? ("Ha! Barry has to use the big bat option!") Because Nintendo wants the whole family to play with Revolution, at the same time, from granddad right down to his six-year-old grandson. By creating an interface that requires a wider range of physical control than simply a set of nimble fingers and thumbs, is Nintendo actually doing the opposite of levelling the playing field?

In response, Nintendo would no doubt point to the doubts that also greeted DS upon its unveiling. We have seen the DS model work – spectacularly, so far – so broadening out that approach by also bringing a new method of control to under-the-TV consoles logically follows. But where the DS's newness wasn't in fact new at all – everyone is accustomed to what it's like to hold and use a pen or pencil – Revolution's



*will* be new to anyone whose everyday life doesn't involve, say, holding down a job waving jets on to aircraft carriers or schooling students in the art of fencing.

We've been assured by a developer working with Revolution that, in practical use, the controller doesn't need to be as physically demanding as suggested in Nintendo's original demo video, that holding it with your forearm resting on your lap will become a natural gaming position, mere rolls and flicks of your wrist enough to bring about the onscreen action you desire. But doesn't this contradict the very ethos behind the hardware's design, that it will not be something with which you interact from the same position we've been adopting for the last 25 years? It is another question to join a long line which will be addressed sooner rather than later.

Sony, meanwhile, continues to develop a higher-definition version of its EyeToy peripheral, expected to appear after PS3's western release. With all of its other areas of progress firmly in hand, it doesn't actually *need* to redesign its DualShock controller (it certainly didn't need to show the proposed redesign it did at E3 2005 – Kaz Hirai has revealed that Ken Kutaragi simply wanted the the PlayStation-family controller to have a new look, having retained fundamentally the same shape for the last ten years). At Sony's recent CES showing, the 'concept' PS3

**When you're building in such an expansive amount of functionality, you're going to have holes all over the place. We'd still like this PS3 prototype's ports to be tidied before release, though**

This image from PS3 FPS *I-8* (above) could be running on 360; the target visuals of the *Killzone 2* demo (left) are rather more excessive. *Eyedentify* (below) will use PS3's new EyeToy hardware

## You can only guess at what Nintendo has lined up for Twilight Princess' Revolution gameplay

controller was nowhere to be seen. A revised, final version will be revealed soon.

### THE GAMES

So – yes – what about the games? You know full well what's coming up on 360 and PS3 – mostly ever-more-refined interpretations of things we have already seen, some of which, because of the way of the videogame world, will be a waste of time for both those who made them and the consumers who're asked to pay £50 to play them. You can only guess at what Nintendo has lined up for the made-for-GameCube-but-playable-with-enhancements-on-Revolution *Zelda: Twilight Princess*, a new, 'proper' 3D Mario extravaganza, and beyond. What's more important in terms of how the relative take-ups of the new consoles are concerned is how much support they'll be getting, and from where. Because Sony's leadership with PS2 wasn't only down to its famed marketing nous, and it certainly wasn't down to the nuances of the hardware itself. It was down to the properties with which it has been so closely associated: the *Grand Theft Auto*, *Pro Evo Soccer*, *Gran Turismo*,




It may look somehow appropriate cruising through space, but the prototype PS3 joypad is a classic example of change for the sake of change. Expect the final version to have more in common with DualShock 2



*Ratchet & Clank*, *Jak & Daxter* series – series which, vitally, appeal both to dedicated gamers and those who buy only a couple of releases each year – and all of the other peripheral titles that you simply didn't see on Xbox or GameCube but which ensured that the average person walking into the average game store on an average console-purchasing day would immediately see, from the dazzling amount of choice on offer, which was the 'best' piece of gaming hardware to take home.

**You only needed** to sit and witness Sony and Microsoft unwind their respective upcoming-game showreels at E3 2005 to see where the biggest publishers' loyalties lay a year before PS3 was due for release. Where Rockstar, Namco, Capcom and Ubisoft were lining up their highest-priority projects for PS3, among the biggest noises Microsoft was making concerned the prospect of an old online PS2 RPG being converted to 360.

Consider the words of one publishing representative: "We have commitments to all formats and it's still early days, but right now our publishing plan hasn't changed much from last-gen: we're committed about 50 per cent to PS3, 30 per cent to 360 and 20 per cent to Revolution. This could change – depending on what happens with Revolution, we could ramp up our Nintendo activity, and there may be some opportunities in the online 360 space that could change our activities there – but our projections are built around PS3 as the next-generation cornerstone." It's the same story at other publishers. Consider the biggest thirdparty outfit in existence: Electronic Arts, which has no less than 20 360 games in the works – but is happy to confirm that it's working on a larger number for PS3. Consider another publishing representative's take on it: "The truth is, most developers we're working with who have console backgrounds want to be working on the PlayStation 3. We'll be bringing more PC content on to the Xbox 360 and often releasing dual PC/360 versions at around the same time, but our dedicated console properties will be leading on the PlayStation 3 in almost every instance."

In Japan, the 360 publishing picture to date is strangely reminiscent of that which surrounded Dreamcast: a handful of low-to-medium-profile developers are revealing their support for the platform, but Famitsu Xbox is clearly having difficulty filling its pages with appropriate upcoming content each month. The consumer picture, meanwhile, is dire (see page 8).

But what of Revolution? Naturally it's down to Nintendo to lead the way. But 'mere' games will not alone constitute Revolution's line-up, not since *Nintendogs* made the DS even more of a success, especially with female gamers, by being nothing more than a cleverly engineered 'electronic toy'. Several experimental titles in the vein of *Electroplankton* are said to be in the works for Revolution, which should ensure that it has the most varied sofware catalogue of all three consoles. Will girls want to play *Nintendogs* again on Revolution, yanking on its controller like a leash? And, if they do, will they be the sort of consumer to buy another Revolution title the following month, and the month after?



A few more questions for Nintendo, then.

And how about one more? How will Revolution's backwards compatibility be handled? How will it choose which NES, SNES and N64 games should be made available, how will they be delivered, at what cost, and how will those costs be charged? Engineering a backend to support so many variables is obviously not a task for the faint-hearted, although the skill and determination with which Nintendo has implemented its DS wifi service shows that, if it sees value in something, it will see it through to satisfactory execution.

Playing the nostalgia card when those around you are so heavily focused on The Future would seem folly were it not for the unparalleled strength of Nintendo's legacy. Just how much appeal will certain NES/SNES classics retain in the eyes of those outside of the dedicated retrogaming community? Will the Nintendo name be enough to drag in those who've passed over the retro compilations the likes of Atari, Midway and Taito have cranked out in recent years? One thing's for sure: every company sitting on a pile of once-popular 8- and 16bit games is eager to see what Nintendo is able to make of backwards compatibility, and, if it works, they will all want a slice of the pie.

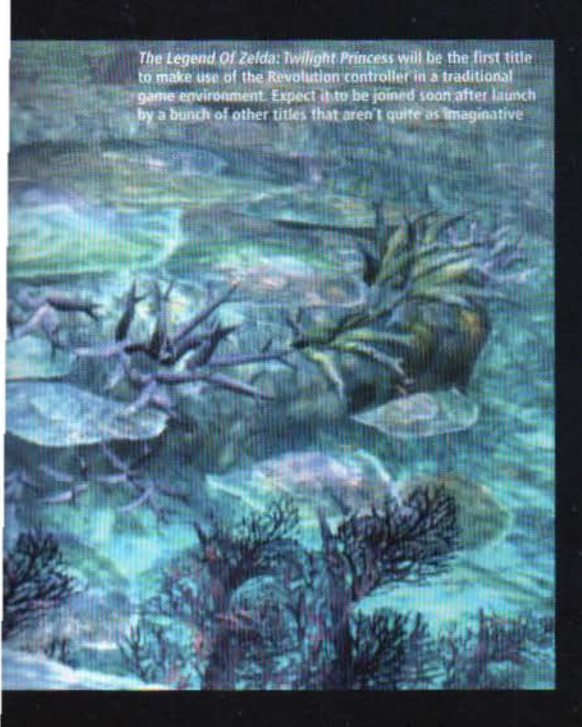
## ONLINE OPTIONS

Sony has on several occasions been asked its opinion of Xbox Live. In its most recent commentary on the topic it has conceded that Microsoft's online console infrastructure does certain things it admires, but that we should bear in mind that, most importantly, more people play online games via PS2 than any other console. Which is no boast – it's precisely what you'd expect Sony to be able



Due in February, Ubisoft's *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* is still very much a first-generation 360 title, although it utilises strong postprocessing techniques. Its online functionality will certainly be more comprehensive than anything we'll see in early PS3 titles




*The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess* will be the first title to make use of the Revolution controller in a traditional game environment. Expect it to be joined soon after launch by a bunch of other titles that aren't quite as imaginative

to achieve with the hardware numbers it's shipped. The truth of the matter is that Sony has not been able to fully commit to an online console strategy the way Microsoft has because of its fragmented technology. With PS3 shipping with a hard drive as standard, the deal immediately changes.

But, if you were a Sony exec looking at the numbers – numbers it will not officially release but estimated to be in the 3-4m range (out of 100m PS2 owners; Microsoft has 2m Live users out of 22m Xbox owners) – you might yet push online down your list of priorities, dabbling with it on PSP but preferring instead to invest in buying up middleware providers in an attempt to support the development of what is clearly your core business – offline content.

Microsoft is coming at online from another angle. J Allard and his team have thrown so much impetus behind Xbox Live because they belong to Microsoft, one of the most internet-conscious organisations in existence. Microsoft owns Hotmail. Microsoft launched Messenger. Microsoft is the reason .wmv files exist. Though it may not have as many comprehensively heralded successes to its name as other operators in the field, Microsoft knows the internet. It is the internet obsessive with his own server in his bedroom and a suite of personal domains from which he runs his (self-coded, naturally) RSS-feeding blog, his band's homepage and a Japanese arcade shooter fans' forum, where Sony is the guy with the Angelfire-powered homepage with the scrolling message running along the bottom in lurid pink text on a black backdrop.

Microsoft knows that people take notice of things like post counts on internet forums. Microsoft knows that 'friends' networks have created simply insane amounts of activity on social internet during the last couple of years. In the wider sphere, Microsoft knows that mobile phones would not be anything like as popular as they are if they did not feature instant-messaging technology. With this in mind, Microsoft has been building a future of videogame console functionality, a kind of functionality whose take-up Sony is watching and learning from. Let Microsoft spend time and money building services that may or may not be used by most 360 owners. Let Microsoft work out how best to provide patches and demos for console games. Let Microsoft take the risks, make the mistakes, explore the learning curve while the userbase is relatively small. Then move in and take advantage of a clean deck.

But Sony is keeping in mind that, despite what they might say, the majority of publishers really aren't very keen on online gaming – or at least not certain types of it. You can be sure that Vivendi is happy enough with the £30m+ of *World Of WarCraft* subscriptions that painlessly slide into its coffers each month, but less so are those who suffered last year when their own new games were not fulfilling their sales potential because the people who might have bought them were too busy playing *Halo 2*. Online. Games like *Halo 2* (and, indeed, *Halo*) have unnaturally long 'active services' because they turn gaming into something that is as much about community as the gaming itself (the clan-led *Counter-Strike* is possibly the ultimate example, played as it is by hundreds of thousands, often at the exclusion of any other title).

Games with long active services are the most valuable companions to gamers running tight budgets, but irritating ticks on the back of the traditional publishing community. Consider which companies produce the biggest online console games. Microsoft publishes the *Project Gotham Racing* series, *Halo 2* and *Perfect Dark Zero*. Sony publishes the *SOCOM* series, by far the most popular online games on PS2. Ubisoft has made more than its fair share of contributions, but where is all the other significant thirdparty console activity online? And consider this: would EA have made such a mess of its Xbox online activity if it was the only way you could play its games?

**Microsoft expects 4.5-5.5m 360 sales by June, making it the fastest-selling console ever**

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

Which console name was in Google's top ten chart for most-searched-for terms in 2005? Surprisingly, it was not 'PlayStation 3' nor 'Nintendo Revolution' but 'Xbox 360'. The keyboard stabs of internet kidz across the globe reveal two things: first, that the world really has gone videogame mad, and second, that Microsoft's profile in gaming is no longer suspect but absolutely legitimate.

As for Sony's profile, it appears to want to be the new Nintendo, by being for all the family. Not for all the family the way Microsoft has envisioned 360 performing in the home – your sister designing outfits for its game characters, your mum browsing photos or communicating with friends and family – but in the manner in which it actually has proven experience – think *Singstar*, *Buzz!*, *EyeToy*, experiences that transcend old-fashioned videogame barriers and reach out to everyone.

How much has 360 gained by launching first? Well, so far it has only managed to sell to those who meaningfully wanted one – and then not, almost farcically, to even them, but Microsoft fully expects to hit 4.5-5.5m 360 sales worldwide by June, making it the fastest-selling console ever launched. Tellingly, though, Sony has never, in any generation, been first to market: Saturn pipped PS1 and Dreamcast cruised into view well before PS2 showed up.

Ultimately, it's in considering the situation of publisher support, more so than relative hi-def or optical disc formats or online activity or anything else, that the question of whether or not Sony has already won the console war may be weighed up.

Which is not to say that there isn't room for three next-generation consoles, at least in the market as a whole if not in the same home (although we rather suspect most **Edge** readers could end up finding room in their living rooms for a PS3 for its exclusives, a 360 for its more robust online service, and a Revolution to deliver what is now very clearly 'the Nintendo difference').

And will the distance between first and second place this time around be quite so pronounced? We'll place a bet on the battle being a lot closer. In five years' time we'll see whether or not we can collect.

# RAISING VOICES

WEST END GAME DIALOGUE SPECIALIST SIDE HAS ONE MESSAGE FOR AN INDUSTRY THAT'S SILL STRUGGLING TO FIND ITS VOICE: THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Six per cent. That, according to **Andy Emery**, managing director of game audio specialist Side, is the average allocation of a game's budget set aside for audio production. That's how much developers and outsource companies like Side have to play with to create what he believes makes up "somewhere between a third and a half of the total game experience". The latter may be a questionable estimate, but even if you think it over-generous, six per cent is a low enough figure to rouse the suspicion that publishers – perhaps even developers – are grossly undervaluing games' audio real estate.

But what would be a fair figure? A publisher might justifiably argue that audio has a minuscule influence in consumers' buying decisions when compared to visuals, theme, or the gameplay itself. On the other hand, the cinematic ambition of so much game software breeds cinematic expectations, and the opinion that most voice and script work in the medium is substandard (so forcefully expressed by the four comedy writers interviewed in **E**156) is neither unreasonable, nor at all uncommon.

Side aims to untangle the knot and raise standards by offering the game industry a 'one-stop service' for sound. With sister company Bob & Barn providing music composition, foley and technical sound design, Side itself specialises in

## PIECES OF EIGHT

**Side's biggest recent project has been the western localisation of Square Enix's RPG epic *Dragon Quest VIII*. It's the first time voices have been used in the series, and Emery upholds it as a model of publisher preparation and commitment. The translated script was "in very good shape, it was a case of some of the language being too flowery, and needing to be taken back a bit," while the company's 'extravagant' decision to go with a cast of almost 40 was in tune with his own philosophy of strength in depth over star power. Side hired theatre director Kate Saxon to handle the sessions and undertook the casting process itself, finding in burly East End comedian Ricky Grover an actor whose physical and personal resemblance to his bandit character Yangus astonished and delighted visiting series creator Yuji Horii. The onerous task of post-sync dubbing was eased by a game engine that could generate lip-sync on the fly. Surprisingly, Emery was most pleased with the relative economy of the dialogue: "Although it was a very long recording process, it was only about 6,000 lines. I think *Fable* was about 20,000. There's masses that is still text-box, so they've made the call to deal only with really key points of dialogue, and do it really well. I think that's the right way."**





Separated at birth: Yangus and his voice, Ricky Grover. The reformed bandit and the former boxer's similarities extended to dyslexia and a liking for string vests







Making a noise in Soho (clockwise from above): Side's founder, managing director and casting director Andy Emery, sound engineer Ant Hales, scriptwriter Andy Walsh

dialogue, tackling everything from scriptwriting and editing through to casting, direction and recording. It has a long-standing relationship with SCEE dating back to Side's breakthrough title *Primal* and including *Ghost Hunter*, *Killzone*, *Pursuit Force* and *MediEvil: Resurrection*. Lionhead is another regular customer (Side handling casting and recording on *Fable*, *Black & White 2* and *The Movies*), and the company has recently completed a particularly juicy contract, the English language dub for Square Enix's *Dragon Quest VIII*.

Though Emery and **Andy Walsh** – one of Side's roster of freelance scriptwriters – are unsurprisingly insistent that "there needs to be more money", they argue that the biggest improvements in this much-maligned art won't be made just by raising the budgets. Progress, they say, will come from the industry being more ready to approach professionals like themselves – less willing to believe that a designer is a good scriptwriter, that a producer can direct actors – and, crucially, doing it sooner. "One of the things we've found is that audio is often considered as post-production, which is a knock-on of TV and film," says Emery. "And it's not. It needs to be shoved straight in there in the pre-production phase, not only in terms of budget allocation, but also allocation of resources – how much memory is this going to be allowed?"

"It all comes back to how early you start thinking about it," agrees Walsh. "The earlier games companies start to integrate audio and think about writing, the fewer problems they're going to have at the end of the process."

**Emery founded Side** in 1997 with fellow students from his sound engineering course, aiming to use the then-emerging hard disc technology to create a budget alternative in dialogue recording, dominated at the time by very expensive West End studios. In a damp basement in Soho, Side cut its teeth on audio books and radio drama, learning about voice acting from seasoned pros like Miriam Margoyles, Martin Jarvis and Prunella Scales as it went. Soon, videogame publishers were booking Side as a studio facility, and a market-wide gap revealed itself.

"What became apparent was that we were providing the studio for a session that had the wrong voice talent – Mr Voiceover from a commercial – and a client that had no idea about directing," remembers Emery. "We approached them and said, 'We know more about this from the work we've been doing in other sectors, so for your next few titles, we propose that we do the whole production'." After expanding into direction – handled at first by Emery himself, later by freelance professionals – and casting, script consultation was the next logical step. Emery took note of the better scripts that crossed his desk and started to collect names. One of them was Walsh's.

"Writing was how games started," argues the keen gamer who, despite having worked across TV, radio and theatre for 13 years, is now happy to describe himself as 'that weird animal' – a videogame writer. "They were text-based and you had people like Douglas Adams involved. And then everybody went: 'Let's have graphics, and forget about stories'. Recently they said, 'Let's have stories again, but we'll write them ourselves'. Although the industry is very young, the art of telling tales through games is even younger. I got onboard about the time things started to change."

Though it does provide a full scriptwriting service, Side is more often asked to perform a review and polish of scripts written in-house by developers. It can be an awkward process. "It's like walking into a room nude with your girlfriend for the first time," says Walsh. "A lot of people are very precious about their scripts or their ideas, and they don't want anybody



Side adjusts its recording technique to suit the game: for *Killzone*'s squad it recorded the actors together in a radio drama style to capture their natural rapport, even though the dialogue would later be chopped up into individual lines





Side welcomes a degree of improvisation in sessions, but not all clients feel the same. "A couple of clients from the US are far more structured," reveals Emery

commenting on blemishes. Other people want you to move things around but within very narrow parameters… It tends to be that people come in and say, 'I've got this broken leg. Here's an Elastoplast. Can you make me feel better?' It's about how afraid you are to go and see the doctor."

So what's the most common cause of a broken leg? Walsh doesn't hesitate. "Failure to think at design stage: a story that's just been tagged on. That doesn't mean that you need a writer in-house all the time, but… you need to think about what you're going to do with dialogue. If, as a writer, you come in right at the end, and they've done all the graphics and the game design, you can only make slight changes within that. When people criticise the writing in games, that's where the big problems come from." He seizes on Graham Linehan's wish, expressed in our comedy writers interview, for Die Hard-style quips in *God Of War* as an example: "It didn't have the game design element built in to do the type of thing that [Linehan was] talking about. If you've got *Grand Theft Auto*, that's an engine which allows you free rein. You can't do that in *God Of War*, it's a completely different animal. That's a point where the games designer and the writer have to get together at the beginning and make that decision."

Asked how writing for games differs from writing for other media, Walsh takes issue with the question itself, arguing that there's no such thing as 'games', different genres and designs requiring radically different approaches. However, he admits the writer is often aiming for one of two, quite opposing goals: making the story "engaging or invisible, depending upon what that story is". In other words, driving the player's desire to progress with the storyline itself, or folding a simple story seamlessly into the flow of gameplay. He cites *Final Fantasy VII* and *Half-Life* as fine examples of the two respective techniques.

Walsh is diplomatic about the quality of developer-written scripts he sees: "Some projects come through and are absolutely brilliantly written. There's nothing to say that people within the games industry can't write." He is equally insistent, however, that a professional opinion should be sought. "If you've got a leak in your plumbing, you call a plumber, not a traffic warden or a librarian. For years, it's been the case of asking the artist, or the designer, or you get people who say: 'I've always wanted to make a film, so I'll write it myself'. That doesn't mean the ideas aren't good, but it's always best to ask a professional to look over it, if only for them to turn round and say: 'Yeah, it's good'."

## "THAT'S ONE OF THE PROBLEMS WHEN PEOPLE SET OUT TO FIND PEOPLE ON THEIR OWN – FILM WRITERS DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT INTERACTIVITY"

Emery has met the same attitudes: "I'm continually surprised by the expectation that the producer of a game is going to be a very good voice director. Have they ever worked with actors before? I hate to say, there's sometimes almost a pressure from the publisher or the developer: 'Why do we need one? Surely you can do it'. I've had nervous producers in here, quite obviously not too happy about directing a session, when our offer of a voice director has been declined by someone else in the company."

Where does he think these pressures come from? Are they budgetary, or just down to a lack of understanding of the process? "I think it's both. But budgetary? It really shouldn't be. Not when you're looking at the budgets that you're looking at now, it's small change. We need to educate. There's confusion about it."

"To be fair," counters Walsh, "the same sort of things turn up in film, in TV… everybody wants to be Ridley Scott. I've also seen a hopefully improving picture with some publishers, where they say: 'Get yourself a voice director, for God's sake get a writer, because I'm giving you X million pounds and I don't want all of that to go down the drain'." However, he warns that even with that attitude things can go wrong, if bought-in expertise has no specialisation in, or affinity with, games. "That's one of the problems when people set out to find people on their own – they find directors, writers who don't know games. 'We'll get a film writer!' Film writers don't know anything about interactivity." It's obvious that this is where Emery believes experience comes into play.

**It's not just** about creative experience; project management and technical skills are also required, owing to the stringent demands of audio production for games (which is, Emery says, "more complicated, more difficult and more rewarding" than the TV and radio work the company also dabbles in). "You've got reams of Excels, filenames, codes, video reference files in varying states, you've got matching from a previous day's session. It is incredibly difficult to manage into a short period of time, and if you're using high-quality actors and a good director, you need to." Once again he stresses how much time and money could be saved by more pre-production awareness on behalf game makers. "The worst session is when a client turns up on the day saying they've got another version of the script. That's very expensive."

It's rare now for Side to work on a project which it hasn't cast itself: those tend to be film licences like *Batman Begins* or *James Bond: Everything Or Nothing*, where the actor comes as part of the package. But its thick contacts book can also be a millstone of sorts, as the



Side has moved from its original Soho basement to a plush, three-studio suite just north of Oxford Street in the West End



Side is currently working on a dub of *Ape Escape 3*. Post-sync dubs are, says Emery, the most difficult jobs, although Side is finally persuading publishers of the value of multiple script passes

company has to constantly search for new talent, wary of building up a recognisable repertory company. "With *Dragon Quest VIII*, we were quite concerned because one of the things we knew we had to do was not use the whole of the cast of *Fable*, yet *Fable* had used 25 of the best UK animation voices. But we knew it would be picked up. They even mentioned it and asked for none of the leads to be used."

Despite his passion for raising the profile of game audio – and despite his company's newsletter boasting of the arrival of the likes of Michael Caine and Judi Dench through its doors – Emery does not believe in the value of using expensive, big-name stars. "An interesting one for me every time is the lack of budget for the audio until somebody decides they'd like to have a certain actor and strangely enough, they've managed to find the £20,000 that it will cost to get them involved. That's annoying. If you said to me, on the dialogue side, 'Have another ten or 20 thousand pounds', my immediate reaction wouldn't be 'Let's see if we can get X', it would be 'OK, let's take twice as long'." This doesn't mean skimping on talent overall: Side's policy is to only ever use agency-registered actors who are by definition already pricier and more sought-after, ensuring a high quality of performance across the board.

Although the company has cast high-profile talent off its own bat before – Brian Cox's booming introduction to *Killzone* being the most notable example – it claims only to do so for the sake of performance, rather than promotion, and sells it to their agents as such (which, says Emery, usually meets with a warmer response). Hiring a big name who has no real interest in the project is, he thinks, a dangerous approach.




"You can spend a lot of money – and I think the movie licence games probably suffer from this more than any – but they just quite apparently couldn't give a shit. They've been obliged to do that session. And they can often easily, intentionally or not, intimidate the producer or the team into just saying: 'Yeah, that's fine'. You can get fairly poor quality dialogue that way, not checking if the context is right or playing in the feeder lines because often there's more of a time pressure with the talent you have. It can be a really disappointing result."

As a casting director, Emery also places immense importance on the technical, tonal qualities of an actor's voice, stemming from a mistrust of the idea that live-action film performance is somehow transferable between media. "You get this sort of 'keep it real' attitude, which is great, but this is animation that we're talking about. Yeah, it can be cheesy, but if you end up with these very dry performances, the pendulum can swing the other way, and it ends up flat. The voice in an animation has to give a bit more, a bit of lift." Walsh, meanwhile, draws a parallel with radio drama's need for an 'orchestra' of easily distinguished voices. Ask Side staff who they would love to cast in a game, and their choices reflect this: Emery declares his love for Malcolm McDowell's hoarse sound; sound engineer Ant Hales picks Steve Buscemi's nasal, animated tones; Walsh suggests Julian Glover, noting that "there are so many actors who are great visually who can't handle a booth."

When hiring, is it a hard sell getting people on the creative side over preconceptions they might have about videogames? "Actors? Absolutely," says Emery with a laugh, "but we've never had any directors say no. We've approached a few actors who've been very honest, which is appreciated – they've said they hate games, or actually, morally wouldn't be interested. I don't know how many times I've been asked for Alan Rickman, but I tell you, I've been turned down every time." Convincing actors to take part is a matter of pitching intelligently to overcome agents' "complete ignorance": explaining the scale of the modern videogame industry and applying a bit of peer pressure by mentioning other names on the cast list. "It's how it works in the movie business as well: 'Who else have you got involved?'"

"The 'just a game' attitude is getting more rare because there are more people out there giving good performances," says Walsh. "If other people are giving good performances, you have to raise your bar, otherwise you get a bad reputation."

## "WE'VE APPROACHED A FEW ACTORS WHO'VE BEEN VERY HONEST – THEY'VE SAID THEY HATE GAMES OR ACTUALLY, MORALLY WOULDN'T BE INTERESTED"

**It's sweetly reassuring** to discover that the business moves that may shape game audio future are shaped by the same minor irritations that bother players in the present. An idle discussion on personal bugbears prompts the revelation of a new service currently being introduced which, Emery believes, will underpin real progress in the field.

Hales complains that a lot of speech "doesn feel right, even just technically. It's not put in the



Side admits to being guilty of recording the audio for *Pro Evolution Soccer 3* and reckons that commentary for sports titles is the hardest to get right. "The spontaneity between commentators is not written, it just happens," says Hales




Side has a staff of ten, including four engineers, and two working on casting; directors and writers are drawn from a pool of freelancers. When it hires directors with no experience in the field, the firm trains them in games' unique demands

right scenario. It feels like it's in a voice booth." Walsh imitates the robotic half-second pauses between lines that destroy the flow of otherwise well-acted, well-recorded speech. "You can see the files flick down in your mind," laughs Emery, and goes on to explain that it comes down to the piecemeal nature of game audio, and how developers implement it. "A film is linear process, and you'll have an audio director, a dubbing mixer who will listen to a final pass and say: 'Yeah, that's beautiful, it flows'. Whereas in a game you've got a lot of people who are delivering audio assets and you've got a programmer, God forbid, who is then going to stick your audio assets in? One of the things we're going to be offering in the next 12 months is an audio director who will go into companies and act as the person who will have a handle on all these disparate elements. And an audio QA as well, acting as that dubbing mixer to a degree. That's an incredibly important progression."

Looking in the future on the technical side, Emery notes that he is currently inundated with enquiries about facial capture (see 'Fitting faces') and daydreams about "an unobtrusive way of capturing a performance with multiple actors – facial, motion and dialogue. I don't think it's there yet." As a writer, Walsh is excited by the prospect of improvements in AI and file management that will make sentence-construction possible, perhaps easing the repetition which Emery admits is "an inherent problem" for which he currently can't see a cure. (He rues the irony that *Fable* has been singled out, when in fact it has one of the biggest dialogue libraries ever assembled for a game.)

But in videogames, technical progress is a given. It's cultural changes – both within the industry, and in the critical and popular perception of its product – that will really shape the voice of games in the future. And for all the frustration expressed in our interview, Side is fundamentally optimistic that attitudes are changing, and fast.

"We're advising on three next-gen titles at the moment," says Emery, "and what is interesting about all of those is that the point at which we've been brought in is much earlier than anything we've worked on before. I think the industry realises that the more people you get involved at an early stage with specialist skills, you get a better product. And I must add: we believe the budgets are going up. But audio is still going to be fighting for a little percentage of this quantum leap that has had to be made for next-gen projects." Walsh, meanwhile, was present at the formal birth of his trade this October: the first annual Game Writers Conference in Austin, Texas. "The fact that that's happened is a massive step. That shows the change in the industry."

But what about the view from the outside? How does Side respond to public expectations of voice acting in games that constantly seem to be one step ahead of the reality? Walsh points the finger at unfair comparisons with the film industry, and makes a persuasive case for cutting a nascent artform some slack.

"This is not criticising any of the comedy writers **Edge** interviewed, because, boy, do I like their stuff, but if you look back at the development of film, theatre writers would say it was impossible to tell good stories in that medium, it's awful. It's a new form which is being discovered. There are going to be mistakes made along the way, but things are improving. The industry's doing a lot right."

## FITTING FACES

**Emery reports a sudden and tremendous surge of interest among Side's clients in simultaneous facial capture and dialogue recording, and predicts it will be the next big thing in the voice acting world. He's undertandably wary about the technical and logistical hurdles presented by the videotaped sessions from which companies like Image Metrics create the capture data (for example, actors will have to use autocues or, heaven forbid, learn their lines) but excited by the possibilities too. "It's a huge challenge, but in terms of getting the facial performance that matches the dialogue performance, I think it's worth it, and our clients certainly think it's worth it. It's interesting that it's not being requested in order to get the facial capture of a known actor, a representation of Sean Connery or whoever else. This is actually a request to make sure they get the correct facial expressions to go with that performance. So we're going to have to be very careful about the actors we cast."**



Brian Cox's performance in *Killzone* was the first time Side had attempted simultaneous motion-capture and dialogue recording. Though he's satisfied with the results, Emery is cautious: "With mo-cap, if you get it right, you get great results, but you can also end up with a load of data that doesn't work"



Side was responsible for implementing the voice acting in *Fable*, which was criticised in E156's comedy writers discussion, and suggests that any of its failings are down to the relative infancy of games as an entertainment medium


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# Sid Meier's Conversation

**Sid Meier has 'found the fun' in places many developers wouldn't even have thought to look. We follow his progress from platformer to world-builder**

With an industry career spanning over 20 years and well over 20 memorable titles to his name, **Sid Meier** is one of computer gaming's most popular and prolific creators. Rising to fame during the golden age of Microprose, which he co-founded, Meier moved on from the then-ailing developer/publisher in 1996 to his independent studio, Firaxis (itself recently acquired by Take Two). Among other projects, he has continued to work on both expanding and refining arguably the defining Sid Meier game, *Civilization*, recently releasing the fourth title in the series. We caught up with Meier, and *Civilization IV* lead designer **Soren Johnson**, on the game's European tour to discuss the process of making history.

**Some of our readers may have first seen your name onscreen in the 1984 8bit platformer *Floyd Of The Jungle*. Back then, did you see yourself following the development path you have now?**

**Sid Meier:** That was a fun game, one of the first I wrote, and incredibly we probably did it in about a month [laughs]. I remember it was all using character graphics – the elephants animating in four stages, the pygmies shooting arrows at you, and the lovely Janice, who you had to rescue, at the top of the screen.

We had no master plan, we were just having fun in a brand-new industry – people ask me how I got started as a game designer, and I tell them I sat down in front of my computer, started typing and said: 'I'm a game designer'. It was a different world back then: two or three months for a game then on to something new. We didn't worry about genres – I'd do a platformer, then a flight sim, then a side-scroller... It was a great learning experience, being responsible for all the art and sound and programming, and understanding how those pieces fit together.

**You also seem to have maintained the ability to switch genres from title to title – alternating military simulators with adventures and strategy games.**

**SM:** We just found whatever seemed like a good subject, then worked out a genre afterwards. When we wanted to do a pirate game, it suited a roleplaying adventure with action elements; *Railroad Tycoon* started out as a model train set, then we added the economic elements. Searching for the fun in these topics, it restricts the ability to explore if you limit yourself to one genre, one type of gameplay – you have to follow the fun wherever it leads.

**You produced an impressive run of respected military simulators into the early '90s, but is the topic spent for you now?**

**SM:** Yeah, I haven't done a simulator for a long time – after the flight sims, *Gunship, Silent Service, M1 Tank Platoon*, I kind of exhausted the supply of military vehicles [laughs]. I've been trying to find a good WWI flying game, but haven't found one that was really fun, so perhaps I'll have to get back into military games. But I think *Railroad Tycoon* and *Civilization* opened up bigger worlds for games than the vehicle games; they were a lot deeper and richer.

**That said, many gamers owe everything they know about military technology and strategy to Microprose manuals.**

**SM:** That was partly thanks to my partner in those days, Bill [Stealey], who was an Air Force guy. We didn't really plan it at the time, but the manuals for all the Microprose games made people feel they were getting something of real value for their money. I think it's a shame that a lot of games these days come with a very small manual – not *Civ IV*, of course, which has a fantastic manual [laughs]. [The manual] was something people remembered, and if you were excited about a game you'd be playing it, but also studying the manual on the bus or wherever. There was a lifestyle, your connection with the game was a real lifestyle.



**Soren Johnson:** We fought hard to make sure that we got a giant tech tree chart with *Civ IV*. We were disappointed that we didn't have one with *Civ III* – it was a big mistake, because people love *stuff* as much as they love the games.

**Was it intentional that none of your simulators overtly politicised their conflicts, even in your Tom Clancy licence, *Red Storm Rising*?**

**SM:** We never tried to put our politics into the games: I think that detracts from the experience, because the player should be the star, the one making all the decisions. And back then it was a brand-new experience just to be able to fly a jet airplane, or to command a submarine, so there was no need to jazz it up with 'Terrorists are attacking, and you have 37 seconds to save the world...' It was enough to pretend you had one of these hi-tech vehicles to fly. It wasn't super-realistic – but we never winked at the player or treated it as anything less than serious, and I think people appreciated that, and got the feeling this was the closest they'd ever get to flying an F-15.





As *Civ*'s visuals become ever more detailed, the series' great decider becomes more awesome and awful: from the exaggerated ICBM site cresting a highly developed city's skyline to the terrible moment of impact itself

**When you moved on to *Civilization*, what kind of leap of faith was involved in building a game from the entirety of human history?**

**SM:** *Sim City* introduced the idea to me that it was just as much fun to build something as it was to blow it up. That was a revelation for us in the industry, I think, because a lot of games at the time were about shooting things, and suddenly here it was fun to create. There was a wargame called *Empire* which had the quality of exploring and revealing the world map that I really enjoyed, and actually there was a board game called *Civilization* – but that didn't really figure into our game too much, as it was limited to ancient times. Taking those concepts, the interacting systems we'd experimented with in *Railroad Tycoon*, and the *idea* of history – of the Roman cities and culture and then taking that all the way up to the present – seemed really fun.

What really triggered it for me was that in *Empire*, there was no technology: you started off with a handful of units, and by the end of the game you'd have 200, so it got totally bogged down. I was thinking about how to get around that problem, and the answer was to get *better* units, not more of them. So we needed to do technology, and then why not have time periods? It almost all evolved from trying to solve that one problem.



The reprise of *Civilization*'s Space Race victory, a celebration of the launch of manned space flight to our nearest galactic neighbour, may leave some hoping Firaxis would also return to *Alpha Centauri*

**Do you think it's the theme of creation that's *Civilization*'s greatest draw? Many players find just as much enjoyment in the more typical gaming convention of blowing up somebody else's stuff.**

**SM:** [Laughs.] I think the appeal of *Civilization* is that it's fun to look back over a game and remember when a huge city was just this tiny settlement, or when you only had this tiny area and now you've discovered a whole continent. It feels like there's a story quality to each game. The destroying is something we could actually play out more – the fall of cities, the military stuff could be more dramatic – but the construction part, creating something unique to you in your own play style, is I think the key. Militarism was a big part of the original game, and it's the easiest and most exciting thing to show on the screen, but over time we've tried to add more and more alternative, non-military strategies. In the latest version we've got the religion system, Great People, and so on – so you have to play it through even more times.

**Was *Civ IV*'s introduction of religion a thorny development issue?**

**SJ:** I brought it up a few years ago, and everyone's like [looks panicked] 'Religion?'

**SM:** Whoah, whoah! [Laughs.]

**SJ:** 'Do we really want to go down this path?' I felt that we had to, because it was the obvious big thing that *Civilization* had never tackled. But I thought the only way to pull it off was if we didn't base it on specific traits – like if Buddhist civilisations are calmer [laughs], that's not going to work out well at all. We found the diplomacy system in *Alpha Centauri* was really strong, partly because the factions had all this backstory that the game built off of, but there wasn't really a way to pull that off in *Civilization*, since everything starts from a blank slate –



Soren Johnson (left) and Sid Meier in London. The customarily self-effacing Meier has just come from a bustling *Civ IV* signing event at Oxford Street's HMV – which may be grounds to have him christened an honorary rockstar designer

"We maintain the philosophy that a game's a series of interesting choices, of decisions that you give to the player, and we always try to ensure there's a couple of alternative paths"

there's no obvious reason why Isabella wouldn't deal with Ghandi. And that's where religion comes in, as well as all the building and civic aspects – it's become another of those classic *Civilization* systems that's not complicated on its own, but in the way it interacts with the other ones.



**On the subject of blank slates and *Alpha Centauri*, it seemed to have a fairly pessimistic view of human nature: given the chance to start over in harmony, mankind instead splits into factions.**

**SM:** Well… it wouldn't have been such a fun game if everybody was in agreement. So we certainly needed the conflict, and it was a great opportunity to experiment with a gameplay mechanic that we knew worked, but in a completely new setting.

**SJ:** It's almost a hybrid game: everyone thinks of it as a strategy game because it's like *Civilization*, but it's actually more of a strategy/RPG – it's very story-based, it's about people interacting, and players really feel like they're plotting a certain path. Beyond that, your choices in that game… the AI always had a few issues [laughs], because the diversity of choices is just gigantic, which is cool for people who want to really experiment with different play styles.

**A recurring mechanic through many of your titles is to present the player with sets of direct questions – is that a design signature?**

**SM:** We maintain the philosophy that a game's a series of interesting choices, of decisions that you give to the player, and we always try to ensure there's a couple of alternative paths – one will be the choice that looks best in your current circumstance, but you're always thinking: 'Next time I play, I might try that instead: it sounds interesting as well'. Maybe direct questions might not be as smooth or elegant as other ways of doing it, but we don't want the player to make a decision without realising it, and then notice later that they could have done things differently. So we're pretty upfront with our choices. With a turn-based game such as *Civilization*, you have time to think about it.

**SJ:** People ask us if we're ever going to move into realtime, but when you view a game as a series of interesting decisions, turn-based is perfect: it lets you lay it all out for the player and keep it obvious.



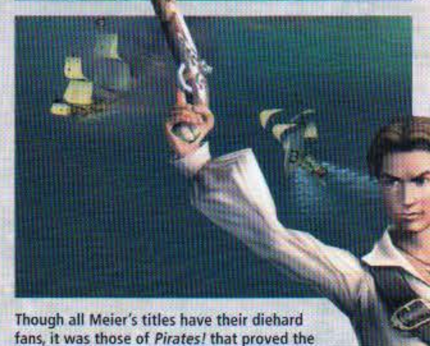
Xbox *Pirates!* was Meier's first direct involvement in a console title since the days of 3DO. He doesn't discount the possibility of further off-PC experiments

**Even though the nonplayer characters are usually ciphers for this decision-making process, many players seem to read human spark into their motives – especially with *Civilization*'s leaders.**

**SM:** It's one of the most difficult games to get to that what-you-see-is-what-you-get model, because we're trying to work with a gigantic world and a small screen. But that brings your imagination into play, and that's pretty powerful – the leaders have a little bit of humour, just to kind of remind you that you're having fun, and the more personality we can give them, the more it makes the game feel alive. Playing a singleplayer game, you often wonder if anyone knows what you're doing – you know: 'Hello… hello… hello? Is there anybody in here?' And to have the King of England respond to you makes you feel that, OK, somebody knows what you're up to.

**SJ:** The human mind *still* doesn't







Though all Meier's titles have their diehard fans, it was those of *Pirates!* that proved the most vocal and persistent in their calls for a remake – released last year on PC and Xbox





The *Civ* franchise has stratified into its own time periods – the original's low-res bitmaps and curt interactions evolving into a more sophisticated environment

understand what a videogame is, and it never will, but it's great at filling in the gaps. It's always fun to read the forums and see what people attribute to different leaders – 'So-and-so did this because of this and this' – and it's just not true – but they're enjoying the game. The best one is that people always believe Ghandi is crazy [laughs]. It's not true! He's always the most peaceful leader, but whenever Ghandi *does* declare war on a player it seems to make this profound impression on them.

**SM:** 'How could Ghandi, of all people, declare war? He must *really* be upset'.

"People always believe Ghandi is crazy. It's not true! He's always the most peaceful leader. Whenever Ghandi does declare war on a player it seems to make this profound impression on them"

**You've always maintained that you make games to be fun rather than educational, but they do seem to have found a happy medium between play and learning.**

**SM:** We don't put things in just because we feel players ought to know them, or to learn them. But the experience of learning is a very rewarding one for most people: if you try a new strategy and it works, you feel you've learned something more about the world. By using real-world ideas you can jump right into the game using what you already know, and if you use that knowledge to win the game it's a good feeling – that was you, that was your own brain that did that.

The best way to learn, I think, is through interacting and playing, and that's the incredible power of computer games. They enable you to experiment, and they're patient – how long you spend on a game is up to you; it'll take whatever time you want it to.

**For one of the few designers in the industry with 'name on the box' status, you've always been openly collaborative with your design leads such as Bruce Shelley, Brian Reynolds, and Soren. What effect has that had on your creative process?**

**SM:** We do have a very open process – we encourage people to contribute their ideas, because you never know where the next good one's going to come from. We try to keep our games open to that for a very long time, rather than storyboarding it all on day one, case closed. And I think the more good designers we have in the industry, the stronger it is. Being able to work with Brian, and Bruce, and Soren, to give them the opportunity to really blossom as designers and show what they can do, is good for the entire industry. There are more games that I'd like to play than I could ever write myself – I enjoy Brian and Bruce's games, and Soren's doing some great stuff. I've got plenty left to do [laughs], I'm not running out of work, so having more designers and collaboration is really positive all around.

**SJ:** I've been asked if we have a dictatorship or a democracy. But I think a lead designer's role is to ensure consistency, to make sure all the stuff that goes in makes sense in the context of the game, and to chop what doesn't. A lot of the key ideas in *Civ IV* have come from collaboration: the idea of improvements matching up with resources – like iron goes with mines, horses go with pastures – came from one of our artists, who said: 'Why aren't we doing this?' And we were like: 'Good question'. Most of the game design and polish is a team effort.

**After making a series of titles with the scope of *Civilization*, is there a temptation to creatively escalate to an even more demanding topic – A Brief History Of Time, perhaps?**





The art of Meier's titles has often taken a stylised, illustrative approach, which has survived the transition from progressively higher-resolution 2D artwork to 3D models, as seen with the most recent *Civilization* leaders

**SM:** What actually happened after *Civilization* was that I did a game called *CPU Bach* – so my answer to how I could top it was to not even try, because I'd go crazy thinking 'If I could top *Civilization*, then I'd have to top that – oh, man!' [laughs]. So I wanted to try something completely different that would be a total failure. But it's an issue to keep the creative process going, working with new people, finding ways to keep fresh without making it about topping the last. It has to be fun for us, I think. If we're struggling and it's painful, that shows through in the game, but if we're enjoying it and excited about it, that comes through as well. So we've got to manage ourselves as well as the design process.

**SJ:** It's a good question, because we're already starting to get the *Civ V* questions [laughs] – my eyes just glaze over. We're really proud of *Civ IV*... I mean, did you ever think that we'd be on version four someday when you first made it?

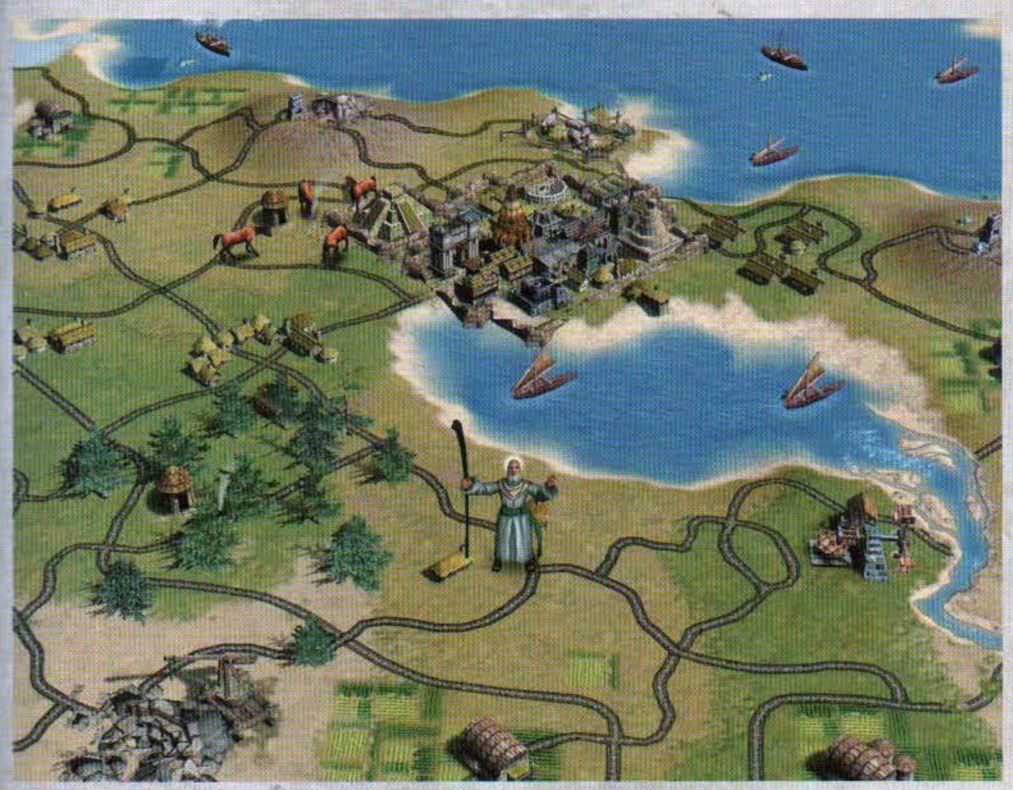
**SM:** You know, I thought *Civilization* was it: we put everything we could in there, and what more could anyone want? But it's grown, it's evolved, become a better and better game – we need a little rest, but we might be willing to think about *Civ V* in a couple of years.

**SJ:** It's such a great topic – there's nothing you could learn, nothing you could talk about that doesn't somehow apply to the game, so there's always new ideas. But we've got to do something else for a bit first, just to wind down.

**Perhaps Floyd could make his long-overdue encore.**

**SM:** *Floyd 2: Floyd Returns To The Jungle!* If we can get King Kong in there, it'd be very contemporary.





Renowned for being a 'singleplayer first' designer, working on the *Civ* titles (specifically *Civ IV*, built from the ground up with multiplayer functionality) has softened Meier's view on multiplayer somewhat – he even admits that he's intrigued by massively multiplayer online games

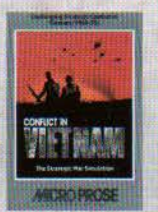
# A series of interesting choices

**Though *Pirates* made Meier's name, and it was cemented by *Railroad Tycoon* and *Civilization*, others may remember him from a different world – that of *F-15 Strike Eagle*, *Silent Service* and *Gunship*. But perhaps just as defining are the titles that slip between those two memorable poles of his portfolio: not always successful in execution, but always fearless in invention.**



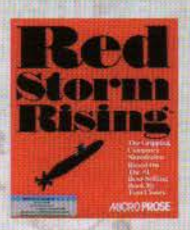

### Solo Flight (1984)

A single-seater mail plane, a well-judged flight model, sparse-but-accurate representations of mountain states – and the certainty that that was enough to entrance players. Simple and unpretentious, *Solo Flight*'s wide-sky spirit seems to have been passed on to consoles with *PilotWings* and *Sky Odyssey*.




### Conflict In Vietnam (1986)

Having previously staged less contentious historical wargames in North Africa and Europe, Meier brought a broader scope to Vietnam than videogaming's traditional focus on the close of the '60s – instead this title starts mapping out the conflict from 1954, providing context to the all-pervading oppression.




### Tom Clancy's Red Storm Rising (1988)

Keeping its Cold War escalation backdrop at a news report's distance only added to the glacial tension of lone-wolf submarine combat, as did the portrayal of the technological leap from *Silent Service*'s WWII-era action with a near-abstract play experience of sonar signatures and torpedo vectors.



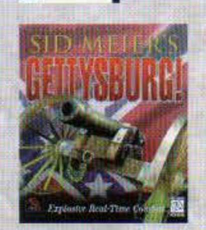

### Covert Action (1990)

Long before CIA operating procedure involved wall-splits and neck-snaps, this non-lethal espionage caper is fondly remembered by fans – if less so by its designer, who feels the melding of lengthy action sequences with a traditionally Meier metagame felt unconvincing as a cohesive whole.



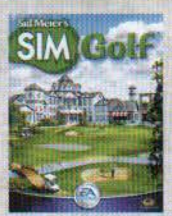

### CPU Bach (1994)

A musical experiment that created unique user-directed, AI-orchestrated Bachian symphonies, *CPU Bach* was a difficult sell to the market of the time in concept, let alone its platform – the 3DO, chosen for its then-superior audio. The combination has made its improvisational Baroque a true rarity.




### Gettysburg! (1997)

The last of Meier's historically placed conflicts – discounting many hundreds of *Civ* Egyptian-Russian incursions – his long-gestating Civil War concept finally emerged as a thunderous realtime strategy title. With follow-up *Antietam*, it remains his only contribution to the PC's ruling genre.




### SimGolf (2002)

Meier made his mark on Will Wright's universe with a construct-a-course title possibly too willfully sedate for the burgeoning *Sims* market. Conversely, players enticed by the prospect of carving out their dream fairways were often left exasperated by the arrival of the titular babbling, blundering crowds.

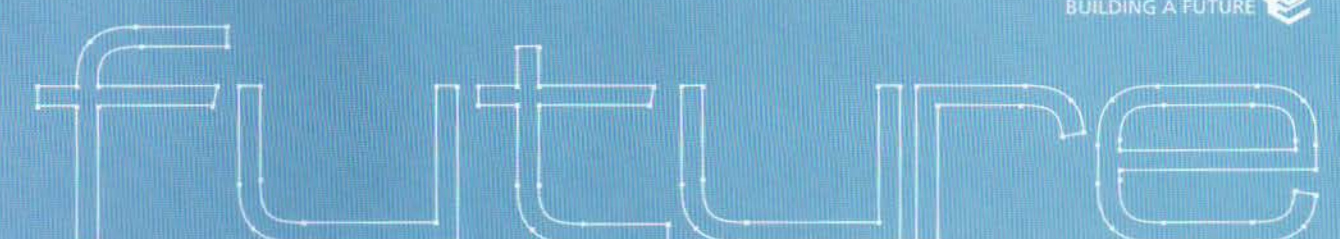
# Building




Making games on 360 and PS3 is supposed to be the hardest challenge developers have ever faced. So why does UK codeshop Climax seem so unperturbed?

You'll have heard the prophecies, of course. Two or three years of developers nervously talking of next-generation challenges: 100-plus teams, millions of pounds, and endless technical hardship. But looking around Climax's conference room, anxiety is the last thing on the faces of those present. Everyone seems unexpectedly calm. Confident, even.

It's not arrogance or delusion. For the past year and a half, Climax's Racing studio has been working on Tomcat, a new development




framework for next-gen title construction. It's not the first time the developer has built an in-house toolset – SuperTools resulted from its belief in tools and technology being central to the creative process. Tomcat is therefore an extension of that philosophy, building on lessons learned with SuperTools while addressing the specific issues of next-gen development, namely the necessary massive increase in art asset creation...

"It's there to streamline our art pipeline as much as possible and all of its major functionality is really geared towards how we can make an artist's job a lot quicker," says **Tom Williams**, technical director.

Central to this, continues Williams, is the WYSIWYG interface. "So as an artist is sat there and texturing materials on to a bike and editing geometry, it's exactly the same appearance as you're going to get in the in-game renderer. That's kind of targeting the part of the pipeline where people are making changes in the editor, saving it, going through a complex and time-consuming conversion process, loading those assets up in-game and then seeing the results onscreen in the engine and taking it back and feeding that back into their model."

**Tomcat massively speeds** up this process, keeping artists working by eliminating the segments that were previously dead time. Wherever possible, lengthy tasks have been automated. For instance, Tomcat's adaptive subdivision tool automatically decides where to add extra polygons when tessellating a

**Real life (above left) and virtual side by side. The *MotoGP '06* dev team has photos of in-game bike models superimposed on to real backdrops displayed on its office walls – and you'd swear the bikes were real too**




Automatic adaptive exposure control (which models the dilation of the pupil when transitioning between light and dark) is just one of Tomcat's subtle but effective tricks showcased in *MotoGP '06*



From top: Tom Williams (technical director, Racing), Jay Green (lead artist, Racing), Julian Adams (lead programmer, Core Technology Group), Jason Avent (game director on *MotoGP '06*, Racing)

model and where to optimise the geometry. The tessellator itself is particularly powerful, allowing geometry to be mixed and matched – Bezier patches, n-patches and subdivision surfaces can sit alongside each other in a single mesh, so artists have the flexibility, unrestricted by the toolset, to model geometry using the most appropriate technique.

It also means this is done within the same tool. "One of the big issues we've had with Max and Maya in the past," says Williams, "was that if you're swapping from patch geometry to standard geometry then you need to come out of one and go into another, and it's all very clunky and a time-consuming process." Effectively, Tomcat takes the standard geometry-editing and texturing functionality from SuperTools and unites it under one roof, while retaining a focused, user-friendly interface.

Crucially, full integration also allows everything to be previewed within the tool itself. For instance, traditionally once an animation is complete it is subsequently placed in-game to see how it's working with a view to minimise texture warp. "You can put that into Tomcat, and we can have them do an exercise routine that would cause the maximum amount of trouble and you can then be manipulating that texture and modelling on the fly – fiddle about while it's moving about," offers **Jay Green**, lead artist, as an example of the toolset's versatility.

"You can see a snapshot that looks exactly like the game rather than doing some work, sending it through, running the game engine, having a look at it with a remote camera and going, 'Don't know about that', which a lot of people are finding on next-gen," he continues, before going on to cite that the latest recruits from rival companies have found Tomcat to be a revelation. "They can come into work and what they make is what they see right in front of them, rather than what they predict and hope to see an hour down the line after a lot of data transfer."

What's more, it's not just a useful prototyping tool for the art team – programmers also benefit (as well as designers given that many gameplay concepts can also be tried out). When the team was first playing around with the parallax normal maps, or the water shader, depth-of-field and dynamic ambient occlusion lighting seen in *MotoGP '06*, all were initially prototyped within Tomcat. A vital development step, argues **Jason Avent**, game director on Climax's first next-gen project (see **E**158). "You don't want to leave it until you have to see it in the game to know that it's going to work. It's very much like the difference between taking a film photo or a digital camera photo, because with a digital camera you can see it immediately and you go, 'I don't like that', so you do it again, do it again, do it again, [until] 'Right, I




L-R: An adaptive high tesselation *MotoGP '06* bike model textured and lit with shaders in place within Tomcat, and a textured, lit wireframe with shaders in place



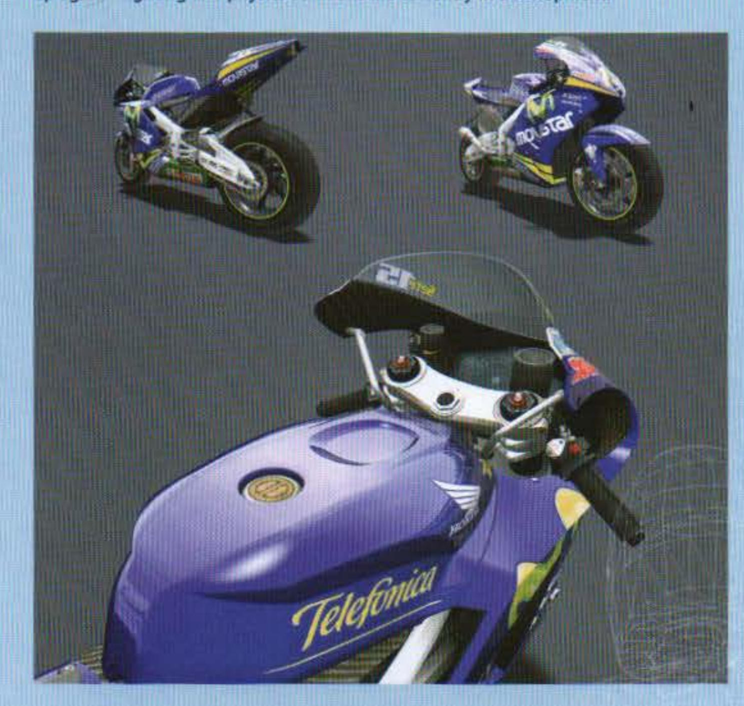




## The Core mentality

**Climax's Core Technology Group comprises 25 team members and has previously been responsible for the developer's Blimey framework (rendering, maths, scripting, image processing, networking, audio, animation and particle effects), Dyne (physics and vehicle dynamics) and SuperTools (among the first in the industry to fully support curved surfaces). Its remit is to research, develop and maintain framework and tools technology for the game teams.**

**Tomcat, which replaces SuperTools, has been in development for over 18 months, and the team has been working at clustering physics to fully harness the power of the new machines. While it thinks the first wave of next-gen titles will be impressive, the team expects subsequent generations will be as much as a step up again – lighting and physics solutions are currently in development.**



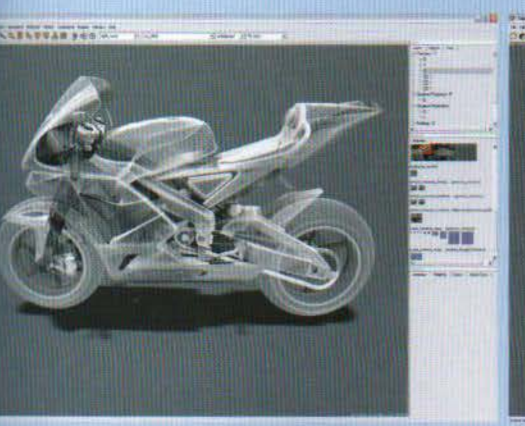

love it'. It means that because that iteration time is low, and the downtime is very low, it makes it a very economical development. You either spend that downtime doing more content, higher quality content, or doing projects with less people."

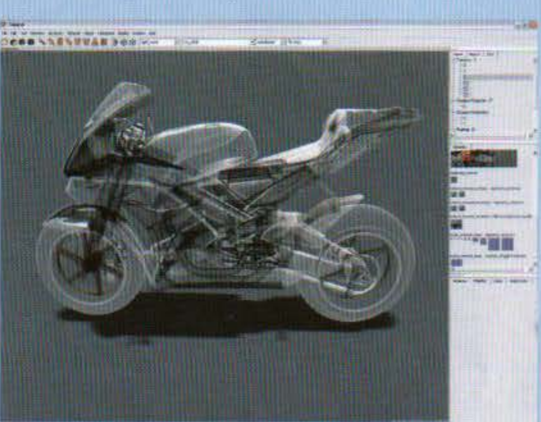
Or all three. At around 30,000 polygons, *MotoGP '06*'s bike models offer five times the level of detail of their last-gen counterparts and yet take only twice the effort to create using Tomcat. As a result, the art team for the 360 title is surprisingly small – just 17 individuals are responsible for the game's 34 tracks and 27 bikes running at 60 frames per second in 1,280x720 resolution. A quick chat with the artist working on the Malaysian track reveals a Tomcat creation time of three and a half weeks compared with the two months it would otherwise take. Climax estimates using standard middleware would render the project twice as long, and the team twice as large.

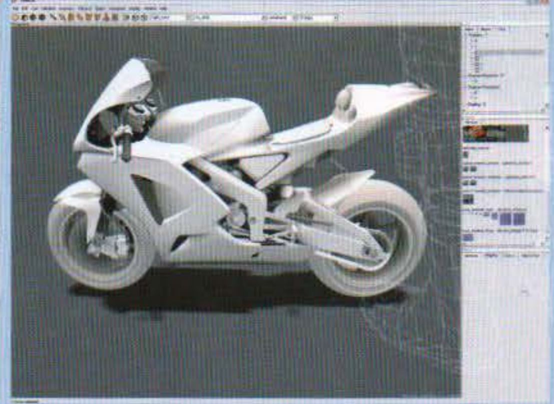
"At around 30,000 polygons, MotoGP's bike models offer five times the level of detail of their last-gen counterparts and yet only take twice the effort to create using Tomcat"

**Which begs the** question, why isn't every other developer adopting this route? "Because people make wrong decisions," Avent offers simply. "At other large publishers where I've worked they might buy a company that does middleware or they might all come together and say, 'Right, this is what you're going to use from now on', and some art director might say, 'Right, you've got to use Maya for this and you've got to use Character Studio for this', and so on."

Williams believes there is a noticeable increase in the number of developers likely to









## Shader management

Realtime procedural shading has become an increasingly important area of the development of graphics hardware in recent years, with the versatility and power of pixel and vertex shaders making them a key feature of next-gen consoles. As the technology has matured there has been a move away from low-level hardware interfaces towards high-level shading languages. These developments have allowed Climax to create a new toolset designed to fully exploit the advancements in hardware.

Alongside their power, programmable shaders can lead to an explosion of permutations (recent Climax games have featured up to a hundred different pixel shaders alone). Many of these shaders are variations on a few basic themes – for example, the same lighting model both with and without animation skinning. The number of possible combinations is massive and this is set to increase still further with new hardware, making shader management a central concern for developers.

Climax has therefore developed a system in which many small fragments of shader code can be written. Fragments are stored in text files with an interface block and an implementation, and these are then linked together to create a large number of different combinations.

One of the major advantages of this system is that it allows artists to create new effects by combining shader fragments without the need for programmer support. This is key to the design of Tomcat, which provides an environment for programmers to create and edit shader fragments. It also allows artists to quickly create different shader combinations, apply them to surfaces and to review the results in a single framework.



**Tomcat has not been designed to be a solution to every issue an artist will face; instead it is to significantly reduce the time-consuming elements of next-gen games development**

*GP '06* scale ranges from daisies at the side of the track to skyscrapers 50-60 storeys tall; a model contains five times the detail of its Xbox equivalent

follow suit. "I don't think it was an obvious path a couple of years ago," he reasons, claiming that Climax's SuperTools foundation combined with the realisation of the overheads involved with creating next-gen assets resulted in the developer getting the jump on the competition. "What you're hearing is everyone shouting about their development process and how much resource they're having to allocate, and people have got to be looking at the waste that they have within that process and looking at how they eradicate it. And they must be coming to the same conclusions as us."

Not that building your own toolset is a walk in the park, obviously. Williams highlights the difficulty in writing tools (and getting them right) without burning up excessive development time and the need to select the right individuals for the task. In addition, he points out that development should be intimately tied in with an active project in order to roadtest elements as they go in. "There's nothing worse than blue-sky R&D for



The Chinese GP circuit in Shanghai gets the Tomcat treatment. Such views are available during development just as they would appear in-game

blowing your budget – you end up with a tool that just misses the mark," the technical director warns. "So in that respect Tomcat, by its very design, is adaptable and is a tool that you can use as a framework for developing tools when they come along. It's an API, which is a set of libraries, which means you can figure your own versions of Tomcat or build your new AI tools or whatever using that framework very quickly."

Ultimately that means Tomcat has no apparent disadvantage. Any inferiority with regard to a thirdparty solution is either eliminated by reconfiguring the toolset or the thirdparty package is used (Tomcat maintains an import/export path to accommodate external packages – Maya and Max are still used by the developer). Furthermore, what may seem like a drawback is also a benefit. "Obviously support and maintenance and things like that have to be taken on within the studio and therefore there's some extra risk associated with that," admits Williams. "But it also means that we've got a much tighter feedback loop for support issues and bug fixes." The Core Technology Group (see box on page 71) is situated next to the *MotoGP '06* team on purpose, so that Tomcat's features can be roadtested and any useability issue rapidly fed back to the team.

**Obviously it has its** limitations, but then it's not been designed to be a solution to every issue an artist will face; instead it is designed to significantly reduce the time-consuming elements (and therefore some of the cost) of next-gen development. At a time when many developers have voiced their concern over the requirements of next-gen, Climax's approach seems painfully obvious. "It's very apparent what needed to happen and Tomcat is a very logical thing to end up with," concurs Green while readily admitting the toolset doesn't represent the best modelling, texturing, and lighting package. "It's the best thing for making PlayStation 3, Revolution and Xbox 360 [and PSP] games. That's what it's for."

## Custom built

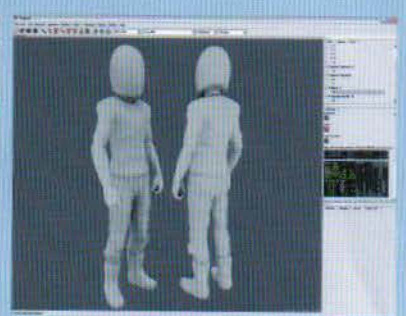
Climax is more than aware of the need to develop project-specific bespoke tools and as such Tomcat also contains its own API for quickly developing custom editors, as **Julian Adams**, Core Technology Group lead programmer, explains:

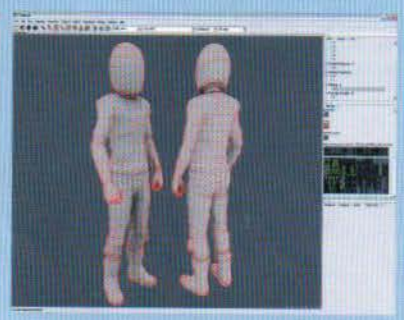
"We have a vanilla one that anyone in the studio can grab and use as a start point, but then the PSP teams have a kind of stripped-down version, which takes out a lot of the fancy shaders so the artists can't used them, and then [the *MotoGP '06* team] have a customised one that has a few features the core element doesn't have, which is stuff they've developed just for the graphical look of their game – a few little things they've got at the moment such as the physical modelling of the light scattering which gives you this lovely [depth in the background]."

"It models how particles in the air bounce and reflect and refract light," adds Jason Avent. "So stuff that's really far in the distance gets really whited out – if you look at old paintings they tried to represent it just by making everything a little bit more washed out in the distance. What fogging used to do is planes of alpha, so what this does is much more continuous and it means that in a track where it's just rained, for example, we pull it in a little bit more and then things that are up on hills but quite close to you still have a little bit of fog to them so it really helps with your perception of depth."











From left: a high tesselation rider model in Tomcat with textures and shaders, untextured, untextured with highlighted vertices, and in wireframe form

# You s to

**The art of translation is one of videogaming's darkest. Here, leading practitioners explain how it actually works. (And why booze, Nazis and religion don't always seem like such good ideas in games outside of Japan...)**

If there's one thing games do well, it's inspire awe. Picture it: a futuristic spacecraft, more fantastic than any childhood imaginings, hangs in infinite blackness with planets for a backdrop. You wonder how many Japanese developers slaved at how many supercomputers for this moment; how many pixellated atoms make up the scene? A missile tears past, stars streaking behind, before punching into the ship's hull. Inside, smoke billows around the terrified crew. A central monitor flickers to life and a tall, dark antagonist sneers into holographic existence. On one side of his face, wires spit through his stretched, cyborg skin. He slowly turns his head, flashing a dark, fierce glare that a hundred artists worked a hundred hours on just for you to find fear in. His thin lips curl into a half smile as they whisper: "All your base are belong to us."

Localisation, the job of transporting and translating every shade and nuance of a game's character, plot and dialogue from one language and culture into others, is the forgotten art in videogame creation. It's often reckoned by the



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Illustration: Si Scott




***Dragon Quest VIII* has been a labour of love for Square Enix's localisation team, taking in an usually wide range of concerns from scripting and voice-casting to re-recording the music**

uninitiated to be a kind of simple post-script procedure, stapled on the end of a project long after the champagne and critical acclaim of the home territory release have trailed away; picking up the pieces after the development team has cleared its desks and moved on to pixel pastures new.

But anyone who has cringed at the awkward dialogue reproduced in Konami's *Suikoden 3* or laughed out loud at the witty, culturally inclusive humour of Nintendo's *Paper Mario* or Nippon Ichi's *Disgaea* will understand the importance of a razor-sharp translation. For the rest of the world wanting to sample a Japanese videogame masterpiece – or indeed vice versa – localisation is the bridge that suspends the disbelief: get one consonant wrong and the whole thing can come crashing down, taking the player with it. At best, a good translation enables us to enthuse and empathise with the characters we're interacting with, making the alien recognisable and understandable. At worst it turns an otherwise brilliantly realised gameworld into a soulless shell of confusion and lost potential.

Editor **Bill Alexander** and translator **Yu Namba** form the localisation department of Atlus, a company famed for its lovingly crafted Japanese to English translations. They guide us through a game's progression in its overseas metamorphosis: "Translators start by incessantly playing through the Japanese game release to familiarise themselves with the mechanics and characters. Commonly used terms such as weapon names and locations are compiled into a list so that they can be used consistently throughout the game. Translation of dialogue begins once we have received the text files for the game from the developer. Personality traits of the game's characters are identified so that they may be consistently and accurately represented in English. After all the planning has been completed, the translators begin on the actual words, which are passed on to an overall editor as they are finished. The text is then reworded where necessary, and finally the files are sent back to Japan to be implemented into the game by the programmers."

Essentially, this is how most modern translation teams work. But it wasn't always this way. Until the mid-'90s, Japanese adventures and RPGs were only rarely brought over to the west. In the main it was arcade titles (and their respective home conversions) that were released. The time and expense required to hire a professional translation team to simply reword a few katakana menu items wasn't worth it. As a result many companies, in particular the arcade heavyweights such as Namco, Capcom, Konami and SNK, attempted their own in-house, in-Japan translations with some extremely varied results (including the now-legendary 'All your base...' line from *Zero Wing*).

At best, a good translation enables us to enthuse and empathise with the characters we're interacting with, making the alien recognisable and understandable

In the case of RPGs and adventures, where simply pasting text files into the proverbial Babelfish was impossible, translators were hired, or more likely, any English speakers in the company were charged with translation duties, although their work was hardly high priority. **Richard Honeywood**, now head of localisation at Square Enix, explains: "I originally started working as an arcade game programmer at Seibu Kaihatsu in 1994, working on *Raiden II*, *Viper Phase I* and *Senkyu: A Battle With Balls*. As I was also the only



## Top mistranslations

**The Japanese language has absorbed and bastardised many western words over the last 50 years. It's these hybrid forms of English words that have spawned the phenomenon of 'Japlish' or 'Engrish'. Examples of Japlish can be found throughout videogaming's history, and entire websites dedicate themselves to keeping their posterity (zanyvg.overclocked.org). Here we collect some of the finest.**




Bangai-O Dreamcast Treasure




Samurai Shodown 2 Neo-Geo SNK




Rival Schools Arcade/PS Capcom




Aero Fighters 3 Neo-Geo SNK




Art of fighting 3 Neo-Geo SNK

Fatal Fury 3 Neo-Geo SNK




Parodius Arcade Konami




Snatcher Mega CD Konami




Wonderboy In Monsterland Arcade Sega




Games usually struggle enough with vocabulary and grammar, so picking up culprits like *The Ninja* on punctuation is perhaps a little strict. Especially when it's a much-abused apostrophe

foreigner in the company, I also translated what little text appeared in the game and manuals, as well as coordinating all the foreign production and distribution. When I later applied to SquareSoft's HQ in Tokyo, they didn't have a localisation department. Although I applied to be a programmer, during the interviews they decided to create a localisation team."

Unbelievably, **Ted Woolsey**, the translator who worked on many of SquareSoft's best-loved 16bit titles, was given a scant five-week deadline to complete the translation of the seminal *Secret Of Mana* – all while the Japanese version was being written simultaneously. "Most of the five weeks was spent in Tokyo," he explains. "Every day I would come into Square's offices and get to work translating the text that had been written the day before. The time constraints made it an extremely frustrating project and, as I had no team to work with, I had to keep all the disparate content in my head, remembering snippets of conversation from the original files to add to the English version. It was easy to make mistakes but the game design was beautiful and in the end the English translation worked for me."

**For many companies** this basic, no-frills approach to translation was hard to shake. It generally took a high-profile title to convince directors of the need to properly invest time and expense in bringing their game to a foreign audience. **Leslie Swan**, who oversees Nintendo Of America's localisation teams, began her career on the magazine Nintendo Power. "I worked on the magazine for ten years before switching over to localisation," she explains. "Just prior to the release of *Super Mario 64* on the N64 I approached some of the development team working on bringing the game to the States and suggested that they hire a professional writer to work on the game's dialogue. It was something I felt very strongly about and so I pushed really hard. Eventually one of the team heads asked if I would consider coming over and doing the job for them. So I joined the studio to begin creatively interpreting the work the translators were doing. That was actually the first game that we did voice recording for, and so while I was there they asked me if I would record the voice for Princess Peach. I went to the studio the next day and recorded all of her dialogue, which was implemented the day after. The text translation worked out so well on *Super Mario 64* that Nintendo asked me if I would create and head up a new localisation team for them."

Being at the forefront of an emerging discipline threw up major difficulties. **Pawel Skladanowski** from the Polish localisation firm CD Projekt was responsible for translating the first foreign videogame into Polish. "The first game we ever worked on was *Baldur's Gate*," he says. "Not the easiest title to start with. Think of any localisation problem or difficulty and you can be sure that our team encountered it in this game. There was a very tricky question of gender – in Polish there are different masculine and feminine verb endings. Some texts were common for the male and female characters, so we had to make them 'gender-neutral', which is not easy and sometimes resulted in very odd sentences. Also, we had to implement special Polish fonts, as the game did not display them, and we had to do a lot of a programming work so that the Polish assets would be integrated properly."

Likewise **Kaoru Moriyama**, one of SquareSoft's very early translators, recalls the 8- and 16bit days: "We had such limited memory capacity for each game it was never really a 'translating' job; more a case of chopping up the information and cramming it back in. We usually had too much text already in Japanese to fit in whatever the ROM size was, let alone the English translation, which in a perfect translation would often have six to eight times more letters than we could afford. So for example, in *Final Fantasy Legend* on the Game Boy, player names are limited to four characters. With cartridge-based media, to actually increase the allowable text required expensively expanding the ROM. However, for Swan, these tight restrictions made her and her teams better writers: "I tell my teams that it takes a really good writer to translate

## Continental drift

**The changes that a videogame undergoes during localisation have been so significant that they have sometimes resulted in the translated version being repackaged and sold back to the market of origin as a special edition. These 'international versions' are increasingly being dubbed 'final mixes' – indicating how localisation is now frequently reckoned to improve on the original release, creating a definitive version.**

**The trend began in the early '90s, when *Final Fantasy IV* had its difficulty seriously downgraded for the American release of the game. The American version was then rereleased in Japan (albeit with Japanese text) as *Final Fantasy IV Easy-Type*. "For *Final Fantasy IV*," explains Square Enix's Honeywood, "we increased the experience points, reduced monsters' HP and reduced the number of random encounters to make the gameplay smoother for the North American audience. It seems the audience has matured a lot since those days, so our recent remakes feature the original Japanese difficulty levels. In *Final Fantasy VII* the western versions were even more different, with many extra bosses and added scenes. Even recent titles such as *Kingdom Hearts* prove that tweaking the game for the western audience can provide a different experience for the Japanese gamer."**




a game like *Wario Ware*," she explains. "Anyone can be a writer when you have ten lines to play with, but when you have just three words you have to use wit, skill and precision."

Another area translators have to improvise effectively is when dealing with specifically Japanese sayings and jokes. Honeywood explains: "Wherever possible we try and change culturally specific jokes, sayings or references to something more fitting for the new target audience. There are many titles where we change graphics, animations and sounds to better suit English. During a scene in *The Bouncer* where Koh is infiltrating Mikado's office in disguise he has to do gestures so as not to get caught. We redid the motion capture so that the mime of an alarm clock and the 'OK' sign made sense to both audiences. You can actually see it if you switch between Japanese and English voice modes in the game. When we can't change graphics or animations, we try our best to translate around it. For example, Japanese people sneeze when someone speaks about them behind their backs. In *Final Fantasy XI* we had a cutscene where an Elvaan prince sneezed while his men gossiped about him. We had to make this a quirk of the Elvaan people so it made sense for British and American audiences." These challenges aren't unique to Japanese-to-English translations, as **Keith Russell**, sales director for independent British localisation company Babel, explains: "We recently worked on Konami's Wallace & Gromit game. Localising 'Yorkshireisms' into FIGS [French, Italian, German and Spanish] to keep the same regional style was a fair challenge!"

For Nintendo, the key in handling these changes is to make every audience around the world believe that the game was made just for them. "Our first goal is to make sure that we're capturing the spirit of the original game," explains Swan, "so if there is a joke which has a certain meaning in Japanese we give that to our creative writing team, and they try to write a new joke which has the same effect as the original. Nintendo games are for the most part extremely well written in the Japanese: for example Intelligent Systems with *Advance Wars* and *Paper Mario* have wonderful writers, so they give us really great stories to start with. It's then our job to recreate that seamlessly for English speakers. The aim for Nintendo is really to make the localisation unnoticeable. What we don't want to happen, perhaps in contrast to other companies, is for players to realise that the game was made for Japan and say: 'Wow! Somebody did a really great job in translating it for us'. The idea is to make the emotional experience identical for players globally; the key to which is making the translation imperceptible."

### "If there is a joke which has a certain meaning in Japanese we give that to our creative writing team, and they try to write a new joke which has the same effect as the original"

**With the arrival** of the internet, videogame hype machines normally controlled by a publisher's PR department were blown open. Suddenly, anyon could buy a copy of Weekly Famitsu and, in one sitting, post more information on forthcoming games than most western publishers would have lined up for six months. Websites such as The Magic Box began publishing Japanese screens and adverts with accompanying translations. This led tc discrepancies between the Japanese game details ii those areas that were being changed for the western audiences. Hence, in the early stages of *Final Fantasy VII*'s pre-Japanese release hype, it was widely understood that the leading female character was to be called Aerith, not Aeris as in the final western game. Other changes to characte names have not been so superficial. Sega notoriously had to change the name of *Phantasy Star*'s antagonist from the inappropriate Dark Phallus, and *Xenogears*' Citan was renamed from the Japanese Shitan. However, it's not only names that get changed in the trip across the oceans. It has been said that the Japanese PS1 game *Dew Prism* could potentially be misunderstood in conversation as 'Jew Prison', so the title was changed to the phonetically easier on the ear *Threads Of Fate* for American audiences.



***Chrono Trigger*** **is one of a long line of RPGs whose bars have been replaced by cafés. Young western gamers have long been mystified about just what it was about Japanese coffee which made so many tough, purple-haired mercenaries have crying fits about ex-girlfriends before slumping to the floor in a stupor**

This touches on the censorship debate, an issue that localisation teams have long had to contend with, as Honeywood explains: "Back in the old NES and SNES days it was common practice to have to change sensitive wordings. *Chrono Trigger* had alcoholic drinks replaced by soft ones, and pubs changed to cafes. In *Xenogears* there were mature, controversial themes, with an evil 'church' betraying its common believers – 'lambs' with Hebrew-sounding names – to an evil empire, Solaris, a city in the sky whose inhabitants had German-sounding names and who slaughtered the lambs for use as Soylent Green. It was an obvious parable of WWII. The game also dealt with young priests being molested by the clergy. Although these themes were acceptable in Japan, the US distributors were eager to tone it down. They ended up forcing me to change the name of the 'church' to 'ethos', but I was able to get the themes across regardless, by careful rewording. In terms of expletives, I find Japanese doesn't use as many rude words as English literature and broadcasting tend to. It's often hard to express rough sentiments in English without resorting to swearwords, and yet not sounding forcibly saccharine or family-friendly. Sure, you can always try to use 'gosh' or 'gee', or do the old comic book '@#$%!'-type replacement, but this often makes the game lose its realism; in these cases, we allow our translators freedom to do what they judge is best. Even when we do use expletives, we always notify the ratings board of how many times they appear in the title as it's the frequency with which they appear which affects the rating rather than their severity."

Similarly Atlus, which frequently ports games examining darker themes, is always careful. "In *Robopon*," explains Alexander, "there were certain sexual references in the game that were geared towards a different age group in Japan than our target audience in the US. We also always use a lower case 'g' for god or gods and any pentagrams are filled in to look like stars. One of the characters in *Go! Go! Hypergrind* had a 'Christ Air' move, which looked too much like an actual crucifixion, so we requested that it be changed to the way that

## All your base

**Comfortably the most famous of all videogame mistranslations, the 'All your base are belong to us' text comes from the introductory sequence of the European version of Toaplan's 1989 Mega Drive game, *Zero Wing*.**

**Internet enthusiasts caught hold of the phrase in 2001, altering various iconic photographs so that they contained the phrase and compositing them into a Flash movie that spread fast across the net.**

**It is now one of the most oft-quoted examples of 'Engrish' and has been referenced in countless places in various types of media ranging from television and film through to other videogames such as *Halo*, *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* and *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*.**

**On April 1, 2003, in Sturgis, Michigan, pranksters placed signs daubed with the phrase all over the town as an April Fool's joke. Police chief Eugene Alli said the signs could be "a borderline terrorist threat depending on what someone interprets it to mean."**






**Sometimes, as is the case in Konami's *Contra*, a translated phrase can make perfect grammatical sense but still provoke amusement**

it is performed in real life." Sensitivities in translations can even be market specific, notes CD Projekt's Skladanowski: "Some markets, such as Germany, have very specific guidelines for game rating, stricter than most other European countries. This will sometimes mean that the language needs to be toned down, or that rude language needs to be changed to something more acceptable."

By working together at an earlier stage with the development team nowadays, localisers are able to influence changes and even add in new original scenes via an unlikely cross-pollination of practice, as Honeywood explains: "Over the years we've built up close relationship with the dev teams so they trust us with making changes – within reason – to their text. Sometimes the planners are so impressed with changes to the translated version we propose, they give us extra information or add extra scenes into the game to improve the presentation of the changes. It's more like we are planning the game together than translating. Take Horii-san and the North American version of *Dragon Quest VIII*. All naming choices and changes had to be painstakingly approved by him. Gradually we built up trust with each other, and by the end, not only had he allowed us to make a lot of naming changes to make the game more natural and funnier in English, but he worked with us to practically reinvent the game with British voiceovers, orchestral sound, new menu systems and added animations and graphics that were not in the original Japanese release. If the *DQ* team had just outsourced the translation like Enix used to, the game would have come out as just another straight translation of the Japanese original. I believe this latest *DQ* is one of our greatest localisation masterpieces ever, and shows what happens when you work closely with the original creators."

Atlus also implements certain gameplay changes in order to better suit western tastes. "In most cases we try to add features that were not included in the Japanese version," says Alexander, "such as the ability to switch between the original Japanese and English dialogue as is the case with *Disgaea*, *SkyGunner* and *Rhapsody*. In *Thousand Arms* we adjusted the encounter rate so gamers would not be stopping for a battle every two steps – which can often be frustrating."

**Outside of gameplay** changes, Alexander explains how any changes to the actual storyline are decided upon: "The amount of freedom we have to make changes to the text in a game depends on the nature of the game, the flexibility of the developer, and on how the project lead wants to approach the title. With *Thousand Arms*, we added many pop-culture references to make the game funnier, but with *Disgaea* the game was already pretty funny to begin with, so we stayed fairly true to the original." Skladanowski agrees: "Generally, the more liberties the creators of the game took while writing the text, the more leeway the translator has in rendering it in the target language, especially in humorous contexts. One example of this was during the translation of *WarCraft III* with its numerous references to American pop culture that weren't part of the game's main plot. They were in many cases supplanted by references to popular Polish movies, characters and events, no doubt contributing to the game's warm reception by local gamers."

The sheer amount of work that goes into successfully localising a contemporary videogame today raises the issue: how do companies decide which games to translate? Alexander explains Atlus' practice: "Firstly, the overall quality of the game is rated. We will play the game and review it in a number of categories such as graphics, sound



## Forbidden words

Japanese game releases have not always been as prolific as they are today. Whereas most important, quality titles now find their way to the west, the pre-PlayStation years saw many games deemed too complicated, weird or leftfield for western minds. During the SNES era, scores of RPGs from Japan's finest developers were never translated.

In 1996 RPG maker SquareSoft decided, against all sense, to can an 80-per-cent-complete translation of *Secret Of Mana 3* (*Seiken Densetsu 3*) instead releasing the sub-par American-coded *Secret Of Evermore* in its place. One of the first major videogame fan translation projects was handled as a two-finger salute to SquareSoft for this decision when a small team of three dedicated Japanese speakers hacked the original Japanese text files in order to release their own translation to fans on the internet via a patch. When the game was successfully completed and released to the public with a translation that rivalled Square's in-house work, the floodgates opened and hundreds of fan groups sprang up around the world.

Fan translation isn't a new phenomenon; fan-subbed anime has long been the only way people could enjoy much of Japan's animation until its recent escalation in popularity. Nathan Deres, 24-year-old creator of the popular Aeon Genesis Translation Projects site (agtp.romhack.ne), explains the attraction of translating old games for likeminded fans: "I grew up with a NES and a SNES, and so both systems have a special place in my heart. With nearly each game I work on, I learn more and more about how the hardware works, the programming models and the code that 'real' developers used. Aside from this there's also the issue of raising a videogame publisher's awareness as to how popular a particular series is. Once I posted screenshots of our *Shin Megami Tensei 2* translation on the official Atlus USA site. That's not something I usually do, but we were trying to pressure them into localising *Shin Megami Tensei 3*, something which went on to happen, perhaps in part due to our efforts to demonstrate the series' popularity in the English-speaking world."

However, as all translation projects involve finding or creating a ROM version of the original game and then patching it with the translated files, fan translation outfits are playing in a grey area of IP law. There's no clear legislation on the issue and companies are sending out mixed messages. In 1999 **John Lawrence** from Enix stated: "We're flattered that we have fans who love our games so much that they would try to translate them themselves, but the problem is that although it may seem fun and interesting at first, it threatens our IP. If this asset is threatened or undermined, it limits our ability to continue to make great games."

Atlus takes the middle ground. "In the case of older games which were not released in the US," explains Alexander, "if fans choose to translate game text for their own personal use, then more power to them." Honeywood has nothing but respect for these homebrew localisers: "Of course we do view and play these fan translations, as we are always interested in seeing how other people render our work. Sometimes the lengths people go to amaze me. Often the text in the old games was compressed; so programmers had to uncompress and recompress the text in order to change it. They also have the same memory restrictions we had, so we are often impressed by the efforts. Technically, it is an amazing feat."

So far only one company has threatened legal action. ASCII asked fan translation outfit Kanji Hack to pull the patch for RPG *Tsukuru 2* from its webpage or face legal action. Despite the fact that publishers will not admit it, fan translations are having the desired effect. SquareSoft's Japanese-only *Final Fantasy V* was, for a long time, only playable via a fan-translated patch but, after the company became aware of this, the game was swiftly released as part of *Final Fantasy Anthology*.

However, there is also the issue of how the quality of a fan translation reflects on the original creators, as Russel from Babel warns: "It is great to see more games getting localised. Fan translations can be fantastically accurate, since they have a real feel for the game. But translation is a specialist skill and there is a danger of not being true to the original language, as well as having a lack of accuracy in the target language. This could in turn produce poor translations and reflect badly on the publisher."

Seiken Densetsu 3




Super Famicom
Japanese release: 1995
Fan patch: 2000 by Niel Corlett

Front Mission




Super Famicom
Japanese release: 1995
Fan patch: 2003 by Stories/Frank Hughes

Bahamut Lagoon




Super Famicom
Japanese release: 1996
Fan patch: 2002 by DeJap, Corlett & Tomato

Sweet Home



Famicom
Japanese release: 1989
Fan patch: 2000 by Gaijin Translations

Treasure Of The Rudras (Rudra no Hihou)




Super Famicom
Japanese release: 1996
Fan patch: 2003 by AGTP

"Generally, the more liberties the creators of the game took while writing, the more leeway the translator has in rendering it in the target language, especially in humorous contexts"

and gameplay. If the game has been released in Japan we will look at the reviews it was given in magazines. If the game receives positive feedback from the majority of the staff, then we hold a meeting to look at the title more closely. At this time, other factors are analysed such as cost, time, effort, and availability of the development team. The target audience, projected sales, expected release date and competition schedule are decided upon and a decision is subsequently made, although success is never certain."

What is certain is that localisation will only become more difficult as games become larger and more complex. Nintendo now employs a team of editors, which works four hours behind the translators, reworking translated text into rich, textured English. Such financial commitment shows the importance of getting a translation just right and, increasingly, the decisions that publishers have to take regarding localisation are becoming more complicated. When Sega brought *Shenmue* to the west, it opted not to translate the game's thousands of incidental items, such as street signs and advertising. However, it did replace all the voice actors with English-speaking parts resulting in a confusing dichotomy of playworld experience. The European Dreamcast release of *Shenmue 2* then saw the original Japanese voice acting still in place but with accompanying subtitles, giving the game an entirely different dynamic. These are not straightforward choices.

Sometimes, in acutely Japanese-themed games, less is more. The PlayStation's *Incredible Crisis*, the epitome of a leftfield Japanese offering, remained largely untouched, losing only a couple of levels because they relied too heavily on knowledge of kanji. Reportedly, when the US localisation team received Treasure's *Bangai-O* with a rudimentary translation and unfinished instructions, the publisher found it so funny that it simply decided to leave it alone. Similarly, titles like *Gitaroo Man*, *Wario Ware* and *Bishi Bashi Special* have played on their unique Japaneseness as a selling point. Diametrically opposite this viewpoint is publisher XS Games, whose port of Japanese shooter *Shikigami No Shiro* lost all trace of its original styling when released in the US as *Mobile Light Force 2*.

Localisation is no exact science and has no set rules. From renaming characters to rescoring music and from recalibrating difficulty to redrafting jokes, it's an exceptionally delicate and wide-ranging task. It may sit comfortably under one label, but those who work under its heading have to bring together as diverse a set of skills as you'll find anywhere else in gaming. It's little wonder, then, that it's a slow and often flawed process which provokes heavy criticism; on the other hand, it also means that exemplary releases should garner more respect than they're often given. In an industry that still has some way to go in regarding translation as an art form rather than an inconvenience, it will take both a carrot and a stick to ensure things improve. More useful implements, perhaps, than a tomato and a pair of pyjamas.

# Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

## Now playing

### King Kong



An unexpectedly potent example of next-gen beautification (in high-definition, that is). Texture upgrades and judiciously applied bloom make the difference.
360, UBISOFT

### Dragon Quest VIII



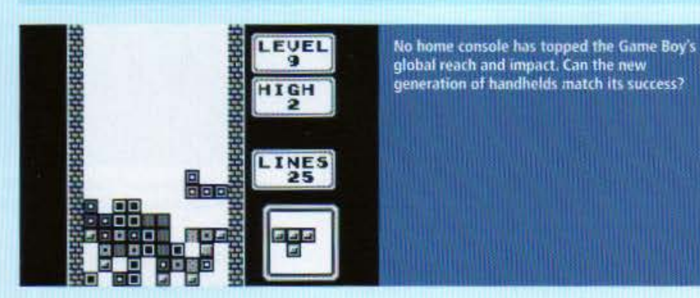
Whatever your tastes in RPGs – or gaming as a whole for that matter – it's a rare luxury to be allowed to settle into something so exhaustively accomplished as this.
PS2, SQUARE ENIX

### Tales Of Phantasia




The release of *Abyss* and a look at game localisation takes us back to DeJap's homebrew translation of the original, which still holds its own as a vibrant and mature RPG.
SNES, NAMCO

## Slotting in
### How Tetris' children are filling a gap




No home console has topped the Game Boy's global reach and impact. Can the new generation of handhelds match its success?

What was your future of gaming? Virtual-reality headsets? Hundred-inch TVs where your sofa's the speaker? Implants that clip on your optic nerve? Whatever it was, it's a reasonable bet that it wasn't glorified Game Boys. And yet, as we head into the year of transition from one generation to the next, handhelds are plugging the gap in the way they haven't before.

This was traditionally the PC's golden age, as last-gen machines show their age, and the new wave finds its feet, but that sector is struggling as it proves tougher and tougher to make money out of standalone titles. And so two handhelds, each of which had it all to prove when launched, rise to fill the gap and dominate this month's review section.

The Japanese DS phenomenon, fuelled by high-profile games like *Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time*, continues unabated, with close to half a million hardware units per week shifting during the Christmas rush. Games like *Tamagotchi Corner Shop* continue to rack up humbling sales, and the top ten is dominated by Nintendo in a way rarely seen since the NES era. In the west, although sales are still slower and the software catalogue doesn't represent the full variety the Japanese are enjoying, anyone who sat down with a DS and their family this Christmas can testify that its appeal translates very well.

Sony's PSP had two great millstones round it's neck – the question of whether or not it could be the PS2 in your pocket, and the fear that it if could, it would be dominated by lazy ports. The visually striking *Prince Of Persia Revelations* leaves no doubt that the former is true, but perhaps more hearteningly the arrival of original, stylish games like *Exit* and the sadly underwhelming *Tokobot* proves that the long-promised age of second-generation PSP titles is well underway.

And is it really such a strange shape for the future to take? They may be descended from humble origins, but these handhelds offer all the hallmarks of a future gaming utopia: personal, portable, social, connected, they've made the greatest strides in helping people shed their preconceptions of gaming and try out new experiences. This is one transition which would be welcome to become a permanent fixture.













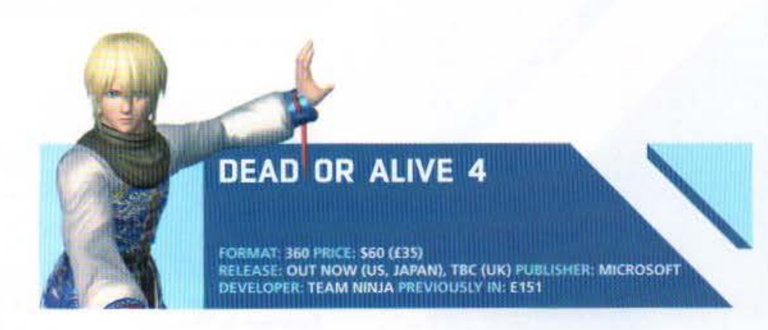








**Edge**'s scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten

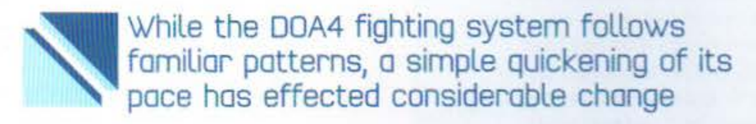





Flamboyant new FMV endings are as you'd expect. Pity those who encounter Hitomi's first, though, because little that follows her chop-socky stir fry routine is as delectable. Zack's flight from a stampede of Ray Harryhausen skeletons and Christie's triumphant descent into unabashed porn do, however, come close

Ultimate was always a name fit for ridicule: a suggestion of finality in a series everyone knew would continue. *Dead Or Alive* has, after all, become the lipstick on the often quite solemn face of Xbox, and a vitally hedonistic vehicle for its creator's inimitable pride. *DOA4*, however, is partial validation of that predecessor's title. Faster, sharper, funnier and harder, it fails to offer uniform improvement, and is at times a lesser experience.

First impressions are of a fighting game in which a new hardware generation has given relatively little to its fighters. A naughty anime that reached a characterisation plateau on the original Xbox, it remains a




softcore battle between immaculate action figures; the difference being that it's no longer soft focus. Its 360-powered engine makes no attempt to draw in whatever realistic blemishes were omitted by its predecessors, instead focusing on crinkled leather and denim seams, weathered floors and the postcard terrain that encircles them. Environmental interactivity has increased, debris explodes in denser clouds and indestructible obstacles act as springboards for vaulting attacks while complicating (albeit only slightly) the visual arrangement of each arena.



For those who maintain that the absence of Christie from *DOA: Ultimate* made its title a misnomer, celebration is in order. She's now a pivotal character, the unpopular hiatus earning her some outfits that might be termed extremely well tailored

Yet Team Ninja stands to be counted alongside those developers still to pursue 360's enormous potential for coupling visual detail with visual depth. In some cases, the absence of the latter is very nearly compensated for by the abundance of the former, stages such as Waterfall Valley taking satisfying strides towards photorealism despite deceptively crude geometry. But elsewhere the game and its purposefully ceramic cast simply appear plain. Supporters of the argument that it's all somehow integral to the *DOA* aesthetic need look no further than the game's rich cutscenes for contrary evidence. The various CG companies to which they were outsourced have imagined an idealised version of the series at a time when the developer should arguably be realising it instead. Considering the prominence of the game's light sources – lurid neon, soft lanterns and blazing suns alike – its contrasts of light and shadow are disappointingly dull, lending its action a look that's anachronistic beyond expectations.

Mechanically, some would suggest that action to be too rudimentary to warrant the intricate changes made to it in the past, but while the *DOA4* fighting system follows familiar patterns – combos occurring in sporadic bursts with somewhat awkward beats in between – a simple quickening of its pace has effected considerable change. As you'd expect, the counter remains king, the much-vaunted reduction of active counter frames having surprisingly little effect on the ease with which they're performed. The impact of such reversals has been lessened, but the result is simply that you'll perform more of them rather than adopt an alternative strategy. Admittedly, the structure of the Story mode is almost entirely familiar, and rifling through it with every character is little more than a three- to four-hour job.

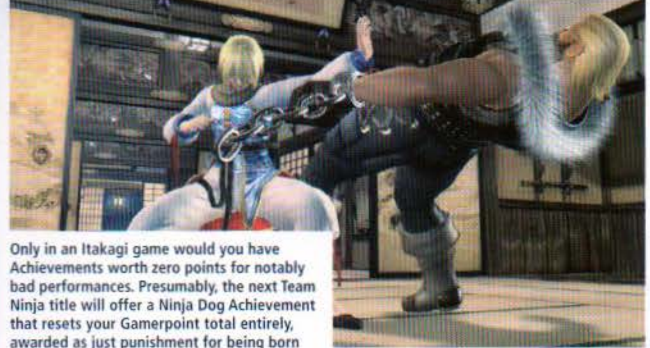
The true joy (and test) of a fighter, however, lies beyond the baptism of that initial Story mode trawl, and *DOA* has historically lived and died by its provision of supplemental challenge. Here, the game's





Of the new characters, La Mariposa – a masked luchadora whose true identity is later revealed – is without doubt the best. Her fighting style is an unpredictable arsenal that's sure to trouble even experienced online players, while her suite of animations and costume selection (one that certainly holds no secrets) is similarly exotic





Only in an Itakagi game would you have Achievements worth zero points for notably bad performances. Presumably, the next Team Ninja title will offer a Ninja Dog Achievement that resets your Gamerpoint total entirely, awarded as just punishment for being born





## Total warrior

"And that is how you hit like a girl" is her victory speech (one of them, at least), and that is only the first of the surprises you're likely to encounter with Spartan-458. A now-famous collaboration with Bungie, this female comrade of the Master Chief has, ironically, been fleshed out particularly well. The model is well drawn and entirely suited to the game's mannequin aesthetic, animated with all the grace of its existing roster. Gimmicks are implemented in a manner that avoids unbalancing fights, camouflage being enabled with a right bumper click and plasma grenades enlivening one throw in particular. You're slipping though, Bungie: where's the hippopotamus reference in her move list?



The genre's bar for such things may be set particularly low, but *DOA4*'s frontend really does look like it was cobbled together in some feature-limited version of Photoshop

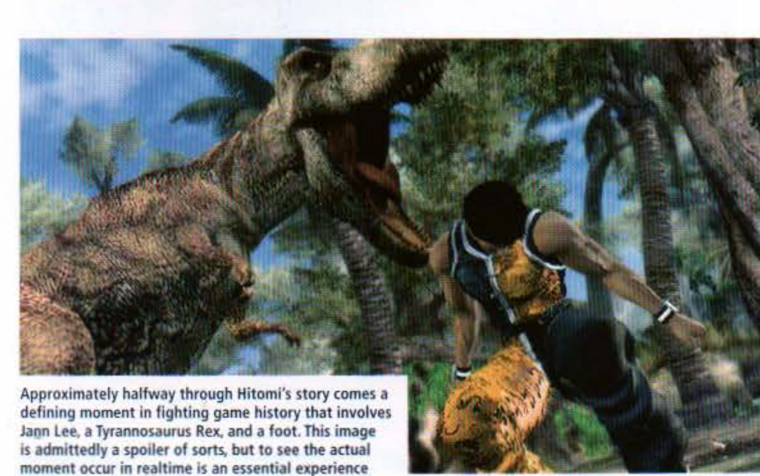


speed truly makes itself known. Itakagi, typically, wants the game's online servers to be graced solely by those who have mastered its singleplayer modes: that's his preference, not an enforcement, but experience the game's aggression at default settings in Time Attack mode and you'll appreciate the elitism of his view. *DOA4* demands, at the very least, a base knowledge of both your own character's command list and the ultimate hit zones of your opponents, victory being far from assured even then.

New charge attacks may be available, but the AI's countering proficiency is intimidating and often overwhelming. Much as with *Soul Calibur III*, its strategies can spike from passivity to onslaught at unpredictable times, and to exasperating effect when the clock is ticking. Final boss Alpha-152 will have you wondering – especially in the wake of Jinpachi Mishima – whether versus-fighting game developers still know what it is to provide a satisfying final contest, as opposed to a brick wall of telepathic counters and whirlwind attacks. Of course there'll always be the Uriens and Geese Howards of any fighting circuit – player killers, if you like – but the balance in this case really is off by a stretch.

Alongside such flaws (of judgement rather than execution, it seems), there are also glitches and other technical shortcomings. As the garments of a fallen Lei Fang glitch upon the windswept Tritower Heliport and inhumanly parted hair writhes oddly around characters' shoulders, the considerably improved recovery animations can easily be forgotten. And those hopes of a remedied online mode will have to await, at best, a subsequent downloadable patch. An overburdened branch of Argos operates in much the same way as the game's new online lobby, and participating in a Quick Match bout is a proposal more laborious than its title suggests. Matches against players of similar bandwidth are reliably slick, but place one bad connection in a lobby and everyone feels the lag.

The prime concern in the protracted run-up to this game – as is now synonymous with the series generally – was that the enormous length of old rope from which Team Ninja likes to reap money would finally lose its allure. By the slimmest of margins, it hasn't, because there are just enough curios here to sustain interest. The game's range of 360 Achievements is novel and should keep those who are now fixated upon such things busy for some time, while its Watch mode now features a sure-to-be-popular snapshot function (interestingly, you can only capture the action while it's moving). But still, with its limited range of costumes (broadened with lazy palette swaps) and unambitious Tag and Team battles, *DOA4* remains as familiar as the mild disappointment it delivers. **[7]**

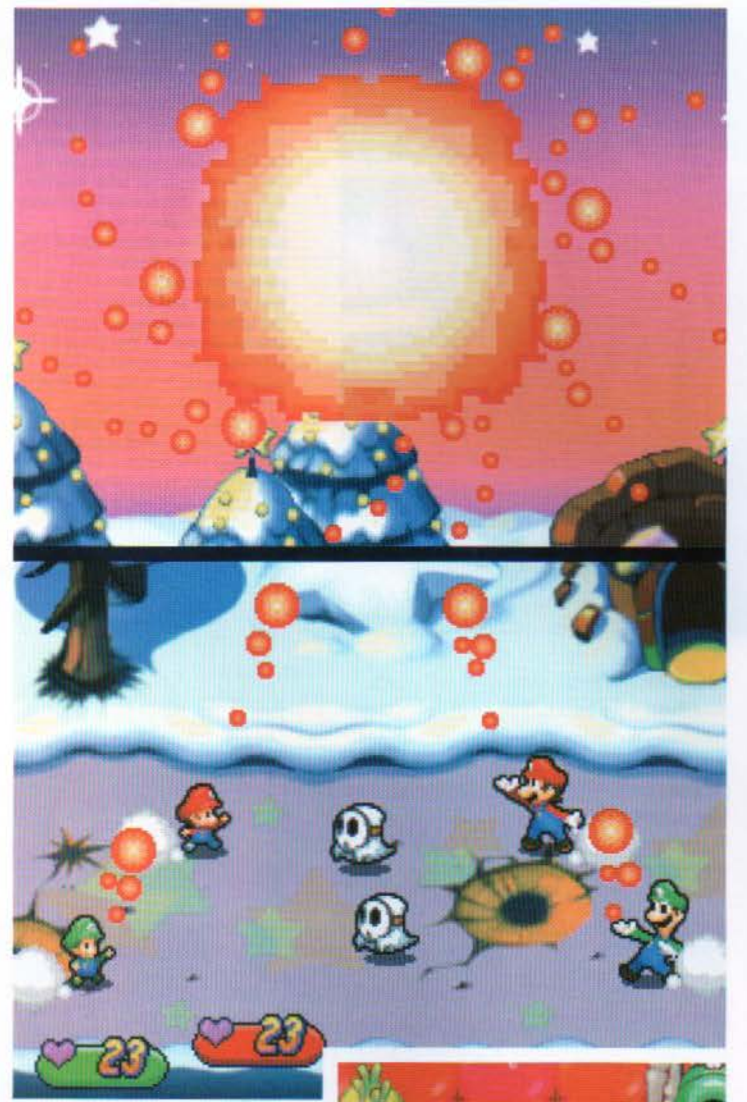


Approximately halfway through Hitomi's story comes a defining moment in fighting game history that involves Jann Lee, a Tyrannosaurus Rex, and a foot. This image is admittedly a spoiler of sorts, but to see the actual moment occur in realtime is an essential experience



# MARIO & LUIGI: PARTNERS IN TIME

FORMAT: DS PRICE: $35 (£30) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), FEB 10 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: ALPHADREAM



Left to their own devices, the brothers can only fight with relatively weak hammer and jump attacks, but a stock of Brothers Items contain some super-powered punches, each one a distinct minigame in its own right

Mario & Luigi: Superstar Saga was a minor mushroom revolution, with Nintendo seemingly granting developer AlphaDream the absolute freedom to play fast and loose with kingdom lore, a privilege the company clearly took to heart. Not only did it gracefully and often hilariously tie together a number of nostalgic loose ends that two decades of various over-extended franchising and spin-offs had frayed, but it introduced and perfected the tightest mix of traditional RPG elements with all the trademark platforming necessary to remain a rightful Mario game at heart. It was, in short, truly one of the brightest stars in the Mario universe, as fresh and innovative as it was familiar and classic.

And that, inevitably, is the biggest problem with its sequel. It could hardly have more daunting shoes to fill, and there's little here that you won't recognise as a series veteran, from its flat-sprite visuals (more or less lifted wholesale from *Saga*) and gibberish-flecked pantomimes, to its richly rewarding rhythmic combat, so much so that it can hardly be called an enhancement so much as a direct extension. It's sad, then, that it also fails to live up to the legacy of its predecessor.



As you'll soon discover, Peach's castle contains a little more than initially meets the eye. Search hard enough and you might discover that the basement underworld's trademark plumbing system is home to a much welcome and ultimately show-stealing special guest appearance



Mario and Luigi aren't so much linked to the past as they are occasional tourists – few events of the past have any bearing on the present day





Scattered throughout the world are special coin boxes that require group effort. More than just a minigame, it's a necessary tutorial in keeping each of the brothers mentally mapped to their respective face buttons

It starts off promisingly enough, with a simultaneously unfolding story of otherworldly alien Shroobs seeking a new home and finding it light years away in the Mushroom Kingdom of yore, when the series' heroes were still in their infancy, and the present-day citizens gathering to celebrate the unveiling of E Gadd's latest time-travelling invention. When a trial run by the Princess instead brings back one of the alien creatures and forms – well, guess what? – rifts in the space-time continuum, it's again up to the brothers to investigate – and in due time be united with their younger selves to resist the alien invasion together.

It's about the time of the intra-generational meet-up that the realisation slowly starts to creep in, and is quickly and repeatedly confirmed, that all of the game's pacing and structure has been rigorously dictated by the developer. Unlike even the modicum of exploratory freedom allowed in *Saga*, nearly every location and event in *Partners In Time* happens on AlphaDream's terms and at AlphaDream's pace, and is played out essentially in a set sequence of



rooms with little opportunity to travel at leisure and soak up the surroundings. You soon also come to discover that Mario and Luigi aren't so much linked to the past as they are occasional tourists – precious few events of the past have any bearing on the present day. Even if they did, the quartet wouldn't have the opportunity to notice as all of your present-day dealings take place in the confines of the Princess' castle, despite the surrounding areas being permanently, teasingly illustrated on the upper screen. These storytelling shortcomings are also underlined by a script which doesn't sparkle as brightly as the original's, with the best of the banter provided mainly by the much-publicised encounter with a pair of l33t-speaking Hammer Brothers. Set-piece motivations are each more vague and forgettable than the last, with the highlight being a trip through a former Yoshi's Island under siege by a raging and hungry giant.

But still, the underlying platforming mechanics are as sound as ever, with an increased reliance on simple puzzles requiring the babies to take their occasional leave and ferret their way through tighter passages to open up broader paths for re-joined advancement, although the focus of this exploration is of course little more than to provide grounds for combat.

Where *Saga*'s complex system of brotherly combos proved initially perplexing but eventually rewarding, *Partners*' combat is necessarily doubly so, with each of the four travellers mapped to the DS's four face buttons. With the babies becoming this game's hammer bearers, and the elder brothers stripped of their former Brother Points and reduced to simple jumps when fighting on their own, it's only as a foursome that the system can deal anything more than the most basic attacks, but even then all of the game's most devastating strikes have been off-shifted into a stock of Brothers Items like the trademark Koopa shells, flowers and Chomps. It's a bold alteration, but arguably a step backward, not least in being forced to overcome instinctual RPG item-hoarding. Whereas the combo attacks of the first could be progressively levelled up and made more powerful throughout the course of the game, mastery of the Brothers Items quickly reaches an upper limit of twitch mastery that's then set on repeat for the remainder of the game, becoming predictable and tiresome by the end, especially when necessary to dispatch the game's fiercely over-long boss battles.

Often, it can be enough for a sequel to deliver more of the same, but in *Superstar Saga*'s case, when what the first game delivered was such a powerful sense of freshness, more of the same – which *Partners In Time* certainly delivers – inevitably feels like less. Newcomers to the *Mario & Luigi* series would be well advised to instead look backward to its still readily available predecessor, and fans of the original should approach it knowing that it does nothing to best its exceptional older brother, and only provides a typical second-album sequel – worthy, but not noteworthy. **[7]**




**While the game's battles do tend to drag on for a bit longer than necessary, most enemies are concealing their own secret exploitable weakness that can be revealed through attack variation and experimentation**

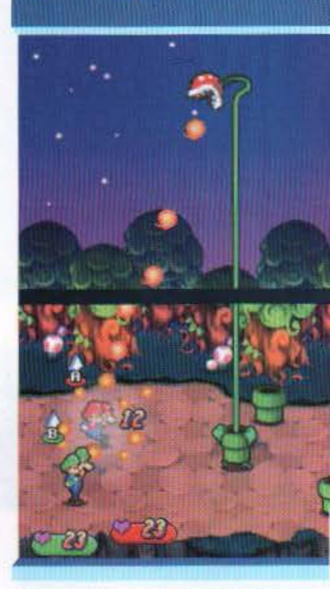



**To call the game's localisation dull wouldn't be doing the translators justice, but it does have stiflingly few opportunities for true comic relief. Even the wordless breaks seem to lack the comic timing that enriched *Saga***



**Like *Superstar Saga*, each enemy attack can be dodged with precise timing, and especially deft fingers can use the feint to their advantage in a special counterattack. Mastery of the counterattacks is critical to minimising frustration on potently overpowered endgame foes**

## Out of touch



**With developers still experiencing growing pains in coming to grips with the DS's capabilities a year into its lifespan, *Partners In Time* is exceptional, especially as a firstparty game, not in how it exploits them, but in how it almost tacitly refuses to. Aside from the customary upper-screen map, the split-party mode and a few rare dual-screened attacks, the game presents only one throwaway nod to the touchscreen (even the interface is restricted to D-pad control), restrains itself to 2D bitmaps, and neglects the microphone and wifi opportunities outright.**





In something of a break from series tradition, the wizard is nearly unassailable in mob combat thanks to a wildly overpowered 360-degree attack – which unfortunately leeches him of what little catharsis hands-on combat offers



The shadow of a character-levelling system remains, allowing health, damage and mana recovery to be raised between stages – but there's no sense of achievement, not least because experience can be racked up via standing by a generator, killing monsters as they spawn



Ranged attacks (above) are attractive but insipid – even when launched by characters expected to specialise in them. Similarly, levels that retain damage-dealing features such as cauldrons of pitch (below right) are more of an accidental annoyance than any sort of worthwhile tactical consideration

# GAUNTLET: SEVEN SORROWS

FORMAT: PS2 (VERSION TESTED), XBOX PRICE: $40 (£23)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK) PUBLISHER: MIDWAY
DEVELOPER: MIDWAY SAN DIEGO PREVIOUSLY IN: E148, E149, E151

## Tales of the unexplained



**"I'm not concerned about selling people on the main story. That isn't fundamentally why people play *Gauntlet*," said Josh Sawyer in our preview in E149, but ironically the final version of *Sorrows* is ruinously empty after his characterisation and scene-setting was relegated to the cutting room floor. An Alan Smithee-style narration remains to tenuously link each level, but leaves *Sorrows'* heroes and villains two dimensions short of the rest of their game.**

From the unlikely initial pairing of John Romero's pulp and Josh Sawyer's prose through to Midway San Diego's recent closure, *Gauntlet's* troubled rebirth has suffered far more than seven sorrows. After the two leads' mid-year departure, the project was hastily reworked as an arcade action game supposedly truer to its roots, abandoning the depth intended to make it competitive in a post-*Diablo* genre. To be stripped of skill trees, cooperative powers, tradeable items, new characters and backstory wasn't necessarily a death knell: after all, *Quake* was similarly reduced from Romero's epic action-RPG ideals, and surely *Gauntlet*, of all titles, could survive the same.

But *Sorrows* is a hollow experience, misinterpreting the original as a sheer numbers game rather than one of constant risk and reward. It's an issue made more glaring by an unsatisfying combat system, paying lip service to counters, juggles and combo strikes even though endlessly repeating the same moves is just as effective. In all but a handful of situations, standing still and repeating a basic attack provides an impenetrable defence, with none of the strategy or desperation that followed *Gauntlet's* tidal shifts of advantage. Even Death's appearances feel half-hearted, and are easily overcome thanks to over-generously replenishing magic attacks.

As each character is largely self-sufficient, multiplayer is robbed of its purpose beyond the insinuation that just having the functionality is enough. Lacking mechanics to require or encourage cooperation, *Sorrows* is more akin to several separate games of *Dynasty Warriors* forced to play out on a single screen. There are flickers of party spirit, such as launching a troublesome spellcaster for others to juggle with ranged attacks – but never the equivalent of making a lucky shot on a potion (or an unlucky one on the food), indeed anything to prove your side more memorable than the AI-driven foes.

The gameplay's flimsiness comes as stark contrast to the solidity that remains of *Sorrows'* production design: regardless of prior knowledge of its cut features, there's an inescapable sense of missed opportunity throughout. Whether in the earthy locations and subtle artistic highlights (we presume the fluorescent neon hit effects were added later in development), or the undeniable technical achievement of the battle throng, it feels like an epic myth lost in Chinese whispers.

That's not to say the original vision was without issues of its own, and certainly those of level design and camera framing remain. A noble failure would have been preferable to this empty victory, though – especially one that positions *Gauntlet* as an unthinking throwback rather than a template for a considered step forward. **[3]**



# TOKOBOT

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $30 (£17) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: TECMO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

It's hard to play *Tokobot* without picking out a mishmash of influences. Like Tron Bonne's adorable Servbots without all the personality, the titular bots are as patient and obedient as Pikmin, dutifully awaiting your orders to arrange themselves in *Four Swords*-like formation at the push of a button, ready to aid you in your quest through flatly coloured ancient ruins with a striking similarity to *Megaman Legends*' locales. However wholly unintentional the comparisons might be, they give it a warm tint of familiarity and accessibility.

And so it goes for essentially the entirely of *Tokobot*. Playing strictly out of the Platforming 101 rulebook, it does very little to outright offend, but just as little to assert its own personality or claim any new territory of its own.

As Bolt, an intrepid young explorer, you'll strike out through ancient ruins, with your bots serving as a variety of tools to assist you in getting from one location to the next. Link up with them in a mechanical conga-line and they can be frozen against magnetic ledges to form ladders or bridges; bring them to your sides to perform a whirlwind attack or helicopter slowly down from high jumps to safety; keep them in a ring and perform a platforming standard jumping stomp. Throughout your journey they'll also learn new transformations to convert them into a hovering samurai warrior, a catapult, or a UFO-catcher crane.

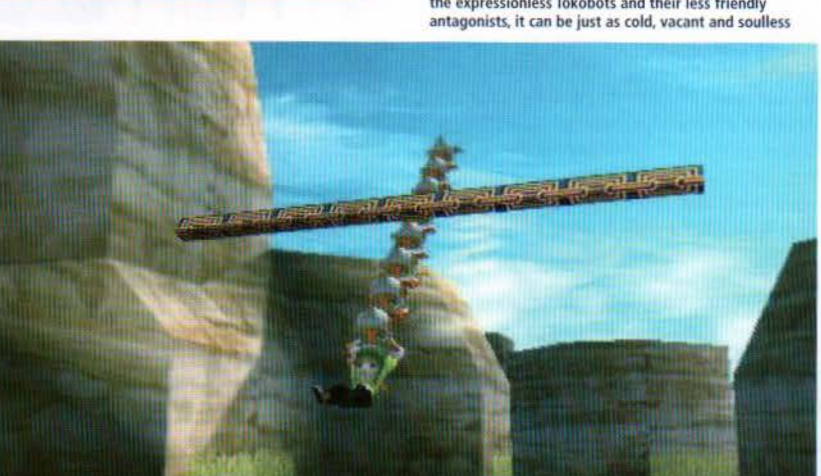
While on paper it might sound like a winning recipe for a lighthearted adventure, in practice *Tokobot* offers so little to challenge either the reflexes or the mind that it boils down to one long, plodding, gentle ushering from one side of a large, mostly vacant level to the other, with nothing to reward self-determined exploration and an identical series of visual Pavlovian cues to let the player know that it's time to switch to the next formation.

In fact, the only occasions when you're jerked out of this sleepwalk into a more active role are in the rare cases when the visual cues are conspicuously absent – when, for example, the invisible trigger necessary to continue is tripped by defeating an enemy you've been allowed to freely pass by in prior levels with no consequences. Also, for all their charming autonomy, the Tokobots have a propensity to exercise their free will at the worst moments, shuffling off into pits just as you need one extra unit of length to reach the next ledge.

For those desperate for a portable platforming adventure fix, *Tokobot* is a serviceable option, but anyone seeking even the slightest amount of challenge, tension, risk or reward should look elsewhere. **[5]**



The gameworld, for all its identical sand and stone architecture, is pleasing enough to the eye, but like the expressionless Tokobots and their less friendly antagonists, it can be just as cold, vacant and soulless



*Tokobot*'s gameplay mechanics are as solid as you'd find anywhere, if only because they rely on the same set of platforming standards as has existed for years, and never dare try to blaze any trail that hasn't been thoroughly tested



While the solutions for many of *Tokobot*'s switch-based puzzles are glaringly obvious, the false sense of security they bring make those that require actions beyond seeking the gigantic glowing 'X' all the more frustrating





Plans for various bot combinations are discovered throughout the ruins – some, like this samurai bot, are used for upgraded attacks while others are simply single-use keys for completing specific puzzles and scenarios

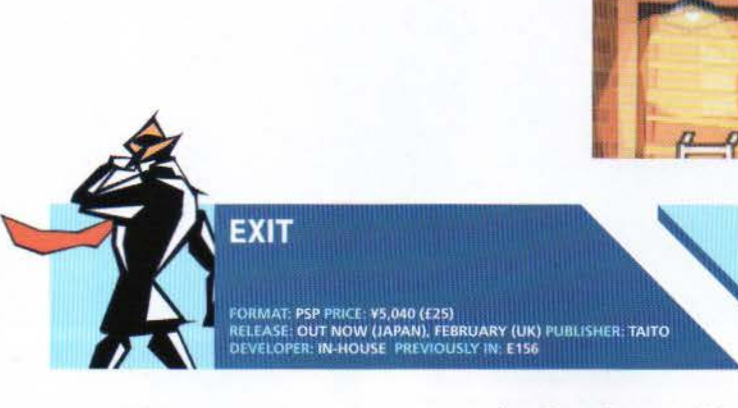




## Something in the way



**While ruins are by definition the last place you'd expect to find an active, living world, *Tokobot* does less than it should to make them an engaging place to play. While Tecmo has given them a smattering of life through enemy guardian robots, they're both scarce and harmless enough to make them less a strategic obstacle and more an unwelcome speed bump on the road to level completion. Defeating them isn't a compulsion as much as a necessary chore to stop them interrupting your platforming.**



# EXIT

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), FEBRUARY (UK) PUBLISHER: TAITO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E156

Games, broadly speaking, are all about the same thing: letting you be the hero. Whether you're behind the wheel of a Ferrari, taking point for a platoon or trying for a 147, you're the leading man. But, prior to *Exit*, rarely before has a game been able make *playing* the hero coincide with *feeling* like a hero. Prepare for your chest to swell with pride as you take on the role of Mr Escape.

Called to a series of disasters – subway collapses, office fires and hospitals caught in earthquakes – Mr Escape races across rooftops to save the people trapped inside. Once inside, he must move with methodical care: this is platforming with all of the original *Prince Of Persia*'s precision, if little of its scope for fluidity. To rescue each person he must locate them, reach them, and then lead them to the exit. His way will be blocked by fires, rockfalls, smoke and locked doors, but finding switches and items (of which he can hold only one at a time) will clear each obstacle one by one. The clock is always ticking down, so forward planning is essential if you're to avoid Game Over.

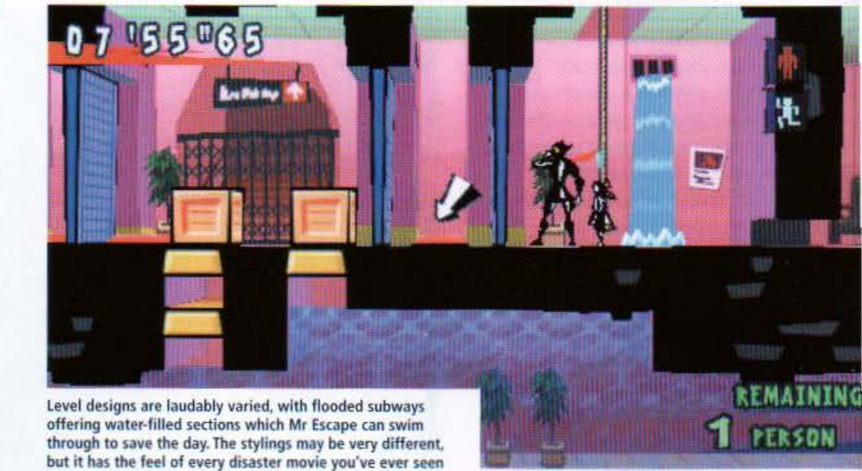
It's a simple framework, but *Exit* wrings every complexity it can from it. Once rescued, people can be individually directed as well as led or told to stay put, and, crucially, they can ferry extra items for Mr Escape, perhaps carrying a key to the exit while he keeps hold of a pickaxe for tackling rubble. If he rescues a child, he'll need to send an adult to accompany it (or go himself) to help it up over high blocks and catch it as it falls. Come across a heavy block barring your way and you'll need to rescue someone big and fat to help you move it, and then someone thin and fit to help you heave the wider specimen on to higher ledges. Injured citizens need to be carried, although they can be rather cruelly dumped as ballast on pressure-sensitive switches. By the time the game introduces weight-sensitive pulleys and fragile walkways, a few simple corridors, lift shafts and stairwells can become a puzzle fiendish enough to make you flinch from a simple glance at the map.

Somewhat inevitably, the game's strengths – the neat, precise movement and the increasing complexity of the puzzles – are also its main weaknesses. As you near the end of the game's 100 levels, it will take several initial attempts – and some long pauses for thought – to fathom just how to ferry everyone to safety through the seemingly impassable maze. To then, on your fifth or sixth time through, fluff a jump or underestimate a drop is intensely frustrating. It is always your fault, not the game's, but it still sorely tests your determination.

Still, it's hard to find reasons not to point to *Exit* as a prime piece of PSP gaming. Its rich colours and bold stylings bring out the best in the machine's screen; the short, compelling levels are perfect for playing in bite-sized chunks, and wifi connectivity means new levels – of which Taito has already made a good few available – will sustain your enthusiasm longterm. Heroes, after all, aren't quitters. **[8]**

## Captured captives

**The people Mr Escape rescues, and indeed the man himself, are all motion captured, lending their stark, monochrome frames a surprising level of expression and humanity. From the ponderous arm-slapping of someone trying to keep warm to the agonising care with which Mr Escape lowers an injured woman to the ground, the detail of the animation makes sense of the seemingly odd choice to represent the game's population in an entirely different visual style to its world. It also gives Mr Escape much of his dashing charm – with his ramrod-straight back, fluttering scarf and eternally tipped trilby. In a game with so little dialogue, this kind of visual characterisation can be crucial, and *Exit* exploits it beautifully.**




Level designs are laudably varied, with flooded subways offering water-filled sections which Mr Escape can swim through to save the day. The stylings may be very different, but it has the feel of every disaster movie you've ever seen



The game is so structural that it could be presented entirely in grids and icons, but happily Taito has embraced something with much more charisma




Should you lead a survivor into danger your rival, Jet (right), will swoop in from the wings to stake his claim to both the person and the credit. Mr Escape is far too debonair to let his frustration show, even if you're not

## SUPER MONKEY BALL: TOUCH 'N' ROLL

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£24) RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

**S**uper Monkey Ball* and Nintendo's DS are two sides of the same coin: the software and hardware expressions of the same idea. Both Nagoshi and Iwata thought that gaming had become too complex, that elaborate control schemes and bloated game design were exhausting current players and alienating potential newcomers. One took his vision from the arcade to the GameCube, using its stick to create a single, irresistible point of contact between the player and his game. The other turned to his R&D labs, and built an entire machine around the same concept. Which is why having that machine play host to this game is such a tantalising notion.

The reality is sourer. The game keeps its purity of control, using the stylus as a giant stick which can be dragged around the lower screen to determine the direction and extent of each level's tilt. Full D-pad control is also available, for those who prefer. It works, no question, although the close-up image of the monkey ball itself on the lower screen gives a misleading impression of how the stylus functions. Better to fly blind – *Monkey Ball* was always a vertiginous game; now 'don't look down' is even better advice.

The problem comes from much of the level design. DS *Monkey Ball's* control scheme is best at sinous curves, worst at sharp changes of direction, but the game inherits both the elegant restrained level designs of the original game and the flawed, over-complicated gimmicks of the second. Getting monkey into position, and camera into position behind him, in time to make your desperate dash for a whirling mechanism has everything to do with the old-school frustrations of instant-death gaming and nothing to do with the effortless application of skill that the first game delivered so appealingly.

It's frustrating, not just as a player, but as a piece of game design, because *Super Monkey Ball: Touch 'n' Roll* could have silenced the sceptics who never thought it could work in the first place. With better level design, the engaging presentation, the thirst for finding shortcuts and the game's inherent charm could have produced the synergy the optimists were hoping for. Instead, the result is a game which feels undermined by its platform rather than enhanced. The core strength of the game remains, even if the just one-more-go instinct is expressed through clenched teeth, but these two ideas, although clearly similar, have yet to prove truly compatible. **[5]**



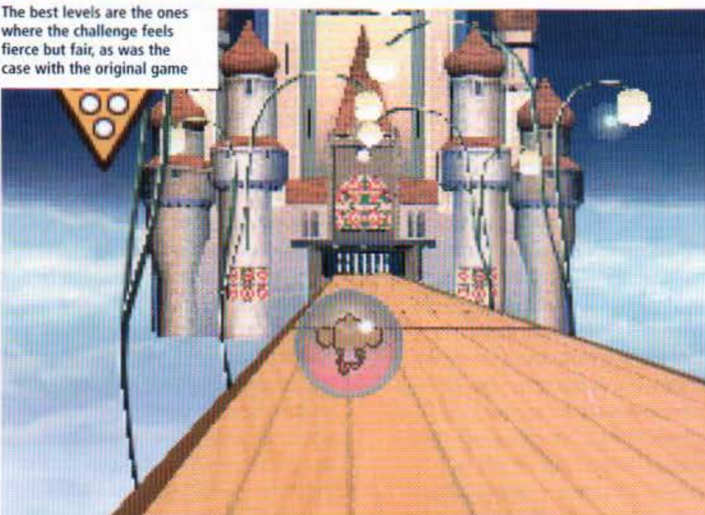
Character design is still unapologetically adorable, but the freshness and clarity of vision which made the first game so irresistible is fading. The music has also taken a turn for the worse, often exacerbating the frustration of certain levels





Levels with contraptions like this carousel, which spins to hide a gap through to the goal, prove particularly fiddly using the stylus and as a consequence reward bloody-mindedness rather than skill or daring as you'd prefer



The best levels are the ones where the challenge feels fierce but fair, as was the case with the original game







All four monkeys are present, but the sense of the different control between them is much vaguer than in the GameCube titles, leaving you freer to chose your favourite on the basis of altogether shallower criteria

### Mini adventures



As ever, *SMB's* minigames come close to stealing the show. Some ideas are better than others – Monkey Race does a better job of maximising the control method than the FPS-lite of Monkey Fight, but it's Golf that emerges the winner, a sunny, smart challenge which often exhibits better level design than the main game. As much a puzzler as a test of skill, it's an excellent foil to the main game.

# POPOLOCROIS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£23) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: AGETEC DEVELOPER: G-ARTISTS

There have been childish RPGs before but *PoPoLoCrois* is something quite different. This, the western debut for the popular Japanese series, has a truly childlike quality to it, as if the story and mechanics were invented by primary school children for a class project, their ideas then made into a videogame by a proud coder parent. In part it owes its simplicity to its ageing source material – this is a collation of the first two instalments in the series, each nearly a decade old – but mainly it's because the game is built from plain pastel colours, binary choices and uncomplicated, innocent words.

The game's prepubescent central character also contributes to the kindergarten dynamic. Ten-year-old Prince of PoPoLoCrois, Pietro, on discovering his previously unknown mother in a deep coma, departs on a quest to reawaken her, contrary to his father's wishes. The plot predictably balloons into a face-off with a universe-threatening demon before awkwardly and bluntly segueing into the storyline from the second game: Pietro suddenly five years older and the object of his quest now switched to the now endangered king.

If the premise seems basic then the execution is relentlessly crude. The game frivolously flits from scenario to scenario, hardly scratching the surface of characterisation or challenge. The story is inventively fantastical but ridiculously so, like a child's weightless daydreaming, and its shallowness is made all the clearer by Agetec's lifeless and laborious translation.

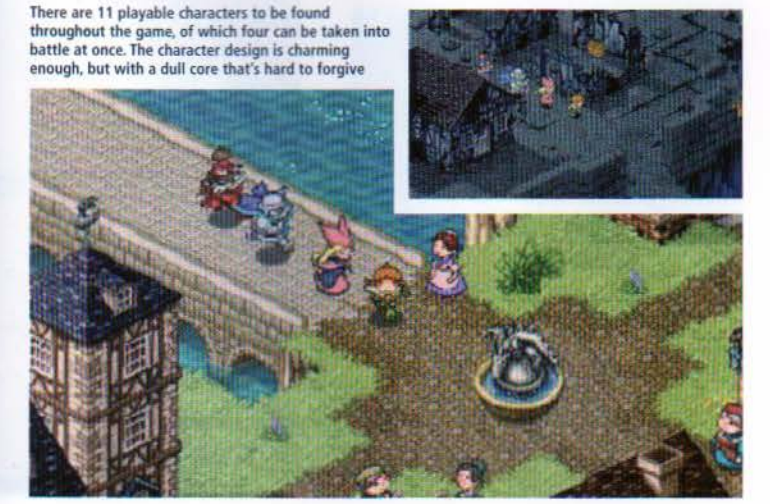


**A long load time signals each battle, infuriatingly interrupting the flow of play – something the designers were clearly trying to avoid by having battles play out on the field, as in *Secret Of Mana***

The RPG-lite branding extends to the battle dynamic, where the default setting has you simply choosing whether you want your team to be offensive or defensive in their AI actions. It's possible to just sit back and watch as the game plays itself, each battle concluding with near-inevitable success for your team. A tactical window can be thrown open by selecting manual control over battles, the field switching to a grid setup with basic strategy elements, but it's still far from taxing.

There may be a market for the beginner-RPG, but *PoPoLoCrois'* constant flight from complexity has none of the elegance of, say, *Dragon Quest VIII*. Rather it tips gently and inoffensively into mediocrity; an awkwardly anachronistic release, inadvisably ported by a publisher keen to fill a generic gap before its game had time to grow up. **[4]**

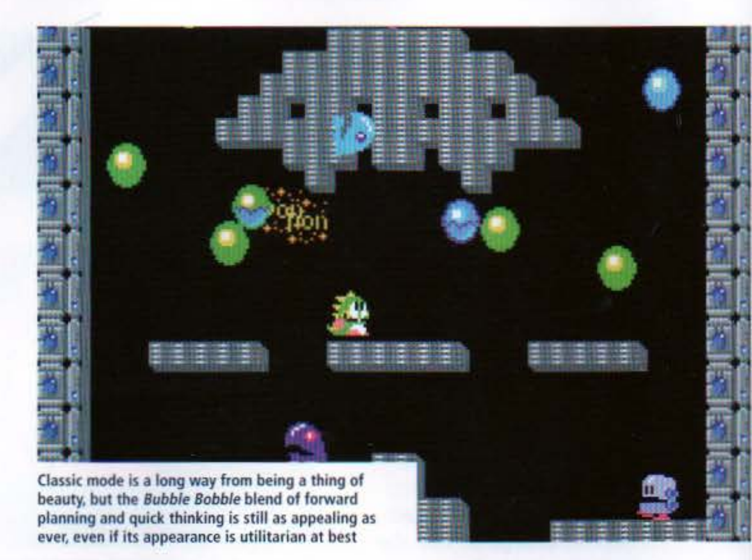
**There are 11 playable characters to be found throughout the game, of which four can be taken into battle at once. The character design is charming enough, but with a dull core that's hard to forgive**





# BUBBLE BOBBLE REVOLUTION

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: RISING STAR DEVELOPER: MARVELOUS



**Classic mode is a long way from being a thing of beauty, but the *Bubble Bobble* blend of forward planning and quick thinking is still as appealing as ever, even if its appearance is utilitarian at best**

There's still no good answer to how you should go about updating a classic, but sitting down with attempts like *Bubble Bobble Revolution* does a surprisingly good job of demonstrating what's wrong with so many modern games and what was so good about the best of the old ones.

New Age mode is *Bubble Bobble's* 'revolution', an elaboration of the classic platformer which expands it in almost every conceivable aspect. The iconic dinosaurs have grown into elaborate and faintly scary sprites, and sprouted a health bar, able to take multiple hits. The levels stretch first over two screens and then horizontally, leaving you scurrying from one side to the other to track enemies and deploy bubbles. And the roles of those bubbles themselves have expanded, with new variants accompanying DS-specific tricks like fans which can be blown into action (via the microphone) to waft them upwards. It's unquestionably a thoroughly modern take on an old idea, but its efforts are torpedoed by the presence of a solid port of the original game on the same card.

Lean, compact and humming with clockwork precision, classic *Bubble Bobble* makes the New Age mode feel like old hat, bloated both in conception and execution. It's still ultimately repetitive and infuriatingly unforgiving, but it has character and compulsion to spare. It's hard to think of two more admirable qualities for a handheld game to exhibit, but it's harder still to be particularly excited by the arrival of another classic on yet another platform. Whether you view the appearance of a game like this on the DS a crucial step in conserving gaming's heritage, a convenient means for a nostalgic fix, or a total reversal of everything the machine was supposed to deliver, you'll most likely greet Bub and Bob with little more than familiar affection. **[6]**



**New Age mode includes tactical tricks like the ability to trigger a ghost twin whose movements mirror your own, enabling you to manoeuvre it into awkward spots and then swap places with it**





## BATTLES OF PRINCE OF PERSIA

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

With the Prince of Persia having reinvented his name through graceful 3D platforming, the confines of a card game seem like the most ill-fitting piece of handheld moonlighting imaginable. And that nearly rings true – the game here isn't one befitting of the series we know and sometimes love, if only because its framework feels so disconnected from the big-screen adventures.

It's turn-based, but there's far more to each skirmish than a simple to-and-fro. Each round is broken up into sub-rounds, where the player draws a numbered card from a selection dealt out from a prearranged 30-strong deck. The number represents the move/attack orders available for that sub-round, or carries an effect that can be implemented. This continues until both players pass on the same sub-round, or their armies – made up from troops, missile and horseback units of varying strengths as well as a single, powerful general – are exhausted, when decks and units are replenished.

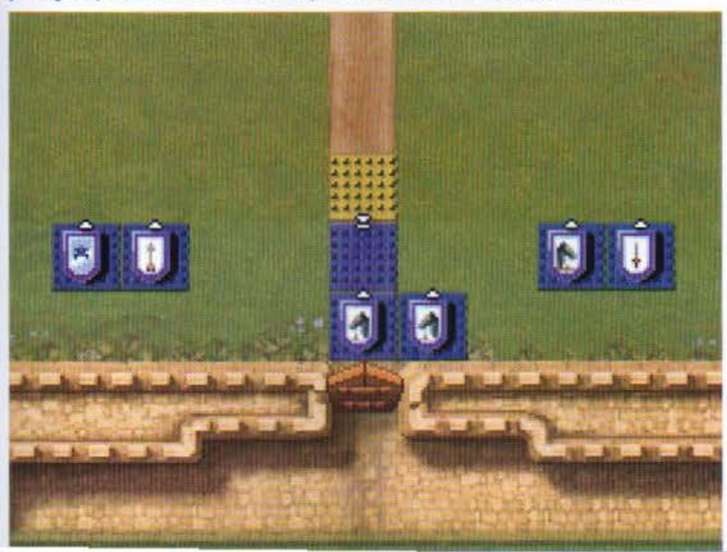
The overarching feeling here is one of an acceptable strategy experience: nothing brilliant, but nothing truly repellent. The framework and range of cards on offer does prove engaging, and once you've started a battle it's hard not to want to see its conclusion, but it's a game devoid of flourish: the animations that accompany combat are bland and unexciting, and the effects that accompany the use of special cards are almost nonexistent.




**The cutscene scripts display the typically hammy style of the *Prince Of Persia* games, but the upper half of each storyboard features the game's best pieces of art. The Prince himself is barely recognisable during the battle scenes, though**

At worst, it feels like a hollow exercise in brand extension, a game where the franchise itself is utilised to provide a recognisable veneer, and nothing more. It's an amiable but unremarkable card-battling title, a robust but unspectacular game. It's no DS disaster, not as throwaway as most of the more cynical franchises that have barged their way on to the handheld with a barely differentiated rehash of a GBA presence, but it's questionable whether, once *Battles* is completed, any of it is worth expanding in a sequel. **[5]**

**Nine generals plucked from three different factions (Indian and Persian armies, and the Daeva race of demons) crop up throughout the game, in a story that's not purely focused on the Prince himself. As you might expect, each race has a few aces up its sleeve, in the form of some exclusive battle cards**





## PRINCE OF PERSIA REVELATIONS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: PIPEWORKS



**Startup times, even with saves, of over two minutes, plus unskippable, downsampled and stretched cutscenes, conspire to undermine the Prince's portability. Elsewhere the game suits its platform: camera control has been ably transferred from the absent second stick to the nub, enabled via a shoulder button**

Ever since *Ridge Racers* made the machine's technical capabilities abundantly clear, the question hasn't so much been the inevitability of PlayStation 2 ports on PlayStation Portable but their quantity and quality. The downwards leap of the Prince to this pocket-sized platform is a dubious milestone – one of PSP's first straight ports of a legacy PS2 title. But while there could be better sources for this rebranded game's content than the flawed *Warrior Within*, that the game's stubbornly enjoyable puzzles have been given a second chance isn't the key problem. The real issue here is in how it's made the journey from PS2.

Ubisoft's primary challenge is to justify *Revelations* to the cynics: those who would highlight the apparent cynicism behind the project itself. By doing so through the injection of crude bonus content, however, it's inflated rather than improved a famously broken game. Worse still, the inheritance of wearisome combat, embarrassing characterisation and impoverished audio now joins a bevy of PSP-specific issues. Neither the game's notorious soundtrack, for instance, nor its scant ambient backdrop of fierce winds and lashing waves, are free of persistent glitching, cutting in and out on a routine basis. Furthermore, to pick the darkest of the series' instalments and not think to brighten it for a characteristically dark and reflective display is a neglect that, given the right (or indeed wrong) lighting conditions, makes the game almost unplayable.

Though it may not prevail, however, an air of suitability does emerge in *Revelations*' episodic puzzle chambers and their staccato bouts of required acrobatics. When it isn't offending the ears, straining the eyes or dulling the reflexes, these sporadic moments of purity make the game pleasurable. It's just a shame that the efforts to expand upon that appeal have resulted in little more than cruel irony, the shoehorned extra puzzles oversized, oversimplified and built largely of overwrought textures – less a pleasure than a protracted course in trial and error. *Revelations* does succeed in living up to its name, but we'd hoped that such disappointments weren't the surprise it had in store. **[5]**



**The straight porting of *Warrior Within*'s assets and systems means that combat is still as patchy as before. Block patterns are unexciting, battles are overstretched and boss fights exhausting. Intrusive button-mash battles also strike hard upon the PSP's delicate-feeling face buttons**


XBOX
TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3



# TIME EXTEND

## TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 3

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE DATE: **NOVEMBER 2001**

### A videogame about an imaginary birdman is no oddity, but here's a game about a real one

So, then, which number is it for you? Which *Tony Hawk's* game should be here instead of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3*? The question of which *Tony Hawk* game is best is one that could run and run, likely until Activision's prolific licensing deal with Hawk runs out in 2015, but every one has merit thanks to the core of enthralling combo-based hi-score play that's present in each. The earlier games in the series were the most basic, but still hypnotic; the latter Hawk titles were obscured somewhat by the ungainly introduction of storylines, and an intimidating abundance of new trick manoeuvres. *THPS3*, before anything else, is the best focal point for a reflection on the series to date.

It's definitely the most striking example of the series' mesmerising and cascading trick complexity, of how adding just a single new move to the player's repertoire can expand possibilities in head-spinning fashion. It epitomises the play focus that kept it at the forefront of a genre it created – trick-rich urban sports with an emphasis on being larger-than-life rather than real. A typical *THPS3* trick sequence is an act of quickfire precision, executed in the time interval of a beat 'em up combo: double-tap up to get maximum air up and out of a quarter pipe, hold a button to spin while pressing the grab/flip trick buttons in conjunction with two or three directions on the stick or D-pad, line up for a clean, straight landing, tap another button for a revert, then slide down-to-up on the D-pad to enter a manual. A dozen movements, all flowing and switchblade slick, repeated in ad hoc combinations across the entire gameworld until the dexterity is simply hardwired into the player's hands. It's easy to get satisfaction from watching the skills of a talented *Super Monkey Ball*er in action as they tackle seemingly impossible Expert stages; there's maybe some to be had just from watching the fingers of a pro-Hawk player in full flow, from their input as much as their output. If videogames were powered by button presses, *THPS3* would glow as brightly as *Frequency* or *Devil May Cry 3*.

Good lines – imaginary paths across each stage that take in combinations of objects that allow for a prolonged and



### THPS2X AWOL

*Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* was the first of the series to appear on Xbox, but the US was given a *DOA Ultimate*-style treat to bring the series to the console as completely as possible. *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2X* was an enhanced compilation of the first two games, with new levels sprinkled throughout, and never saw release in Europe. By the time a conversion had arrived, it would have likely clashed somewhat with the imminent *THPS3*, a superior follow-up that eclipsed *THPS2X*, however much it had been polished up. And, for those patient Xbox faithful, a new stage – a dizzying, multi-tiered oil rig – was added in as an exclusive sweetener.

continuous chain of tricks – in early *Tony Hawk* games were precious and memorable, and exploiting them was key. Latter titles, such as *THUG* (*Tony Hawk's Underground*) 1 and 2, and *THAW* (*Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*), placed so many stunts at the player's disposal that good lines could easily be buffered by off-board backflips, clumsy wall-runs and mid-grind stalls. Reaction and muscle memory were still tested, but intricate knowledge of the game world was much less of a requirement.

The move from *THPS2* to *THPS3* is the perfect illustration of how a gameworld can take on a new dimension of complexity from the addition of just one pivotal mechanism. And it's literally a pivotal one – *THPS3* added the revert, a 180° twist of the board executed while coming down and out of a quarter-pipe, allowing the player to segue instantly into a manual, a two-wheel balance they could ride to their grind rail or half-pipe. This alone pushed adept single-combo score totals from the hundreds of thousands into the millions, with the player now able to join up the trick strings learned from the first two games, weaving them into a tapestry of possibilities that carpeted the whole level. Many more skills were added in subsequent *Tony Hawk* titles, and in higher numbers, each expanding the player's reach in terms of how they interact with each stage, but few come close to feeling as essential and potent as the revert, a fundamental component rather than an option. *THPS4*, for example, introduced the spine transfer, a mid-air move that would allow players to transfer from one half-pipe into a neighbouring one; it also levelled them out with the ground below, a get-out-of-jail card for those who jumped out of a half-pipe at a disastrous angle. It's a welcome piece of unreality that fits in nicely, but arguably destroys any smooth grace. As does the option, introduced in *THUG*, to get off your skateboard and roam on foot, an aspect that has evolved into an imprecise and glitchy set of acrobatics in subsequent titles. The trick repertoire of the series has never been refined or edited, just expanded. More and more functionality has been wrung out of the dual-stick joypad setup to provide an enormous vocabulary of tricks that must seem deafening to the uninitiated; conversations between seasoned *Hawk's* players are certainly impenetrable and jargon-infested enough to require a glossary.




**Twoplayer sessions have been a perennial highlight of the franchise. 'Horse' mode remains brilliant, where players input an offensive word at the outset, then take turns to beat one another's scores, with the loser earning a letter, resulting eventually in an insult with a personal touch**

## The move from THPS2 to THPS3 is a perfect illustration of how a game can take on a new complexity with just one pivotal addition

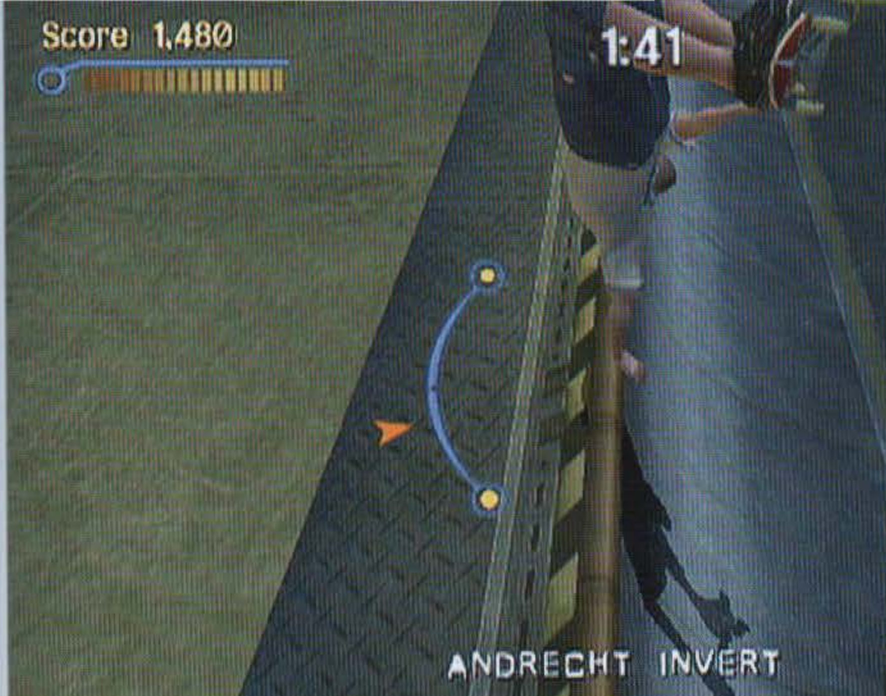
Crafting intricate strings of scores is hardly news to established players, but the innovation of the *Hawk's* games was that pressure to perform didn't come from a scrolling screen of choreographed bullet hell, or attacking swarms of gun and blade fodder. It came from the player's own exploitation of the environment, a creative act based on the truly open-ended nature of the game's trick combo system. In terms of skill cultivation, it's up there with *Super Monkey Ball* – that feeling of initial bewilderment at the demands thrown down, only for it to become a sense of true accomplishment as the player looks back after several hours of investment, able to tangibly gauge the improvement in their abilities.



**Of the series' more immature and trashy moments, none can beat this gleeful detail from *THPS3*'s Canada stage for puerile joy: a man stands on the tip of a half-pipe, urinating over the side of a cliff in a never-ending torrent broken only by his occasional whooping at this rather tremendous achievement**

**Seven iterations spread** over tw generations of home consoles – Neversoft's series has become as leading and recognisable a brand as the skate figurehead it carries. It's a property that seems to have been built as much on its videogame value as licensed merchandising and lifestyle motif attractions. To emphasise that point, the original *THPS* was regarded as the gaudie and more exaggerated of the PSone skateboarding games of its time, a cartoon of double-jumping superheroes next to, say, *Thrasher: Skate & Destroy*. It endured, obviously, and few other western franchises can claim to have hit such pace and survived, even if it feels in less rude health at the present.

But forget the head or heart of the series – take a look at its skin. *Tony Hawk* games have, almost traditionally, had a poor, threadbare quality about their visuals. Blocky buildings, minimal texture and primitive character models are its stock-in-trade – an unimpressive canvas that improves somewhat with each subsequent iteration, but feels increasingly raw as well-programmed heavyweights squeeze more and more




Anyone who's wanted the latter *Tony Hawk's* games to remain about line-hunting and the disciplined use of the most basic techniques can still have their wish – options have been included in the *THUG* and *THAW* games to deactivate on-foot manoeuvres and other novel skills

graphical flourish out of the current consoles. It's not so noticeable in the earliest iterations of the series, a time when 3D was only just beginning to unfold, but hung heavier as the games progressed (although the Mall stage from *THPS*, with its huge, super-deformed props and bus-wide escalators, now looks absurd). But no matter: it never lost track of scale and speed, two fundamental conduits for its flowing, freeform play. It's not the most glamorous of bait, but big-screen bang and visual swagger were never what the series has chased.

The fifth game – *THUG* – took grey as its primary colour, and introduced some one-off novelty goals centred on vehicles with abominable handling and animation, a slim part of the package that stuck out something sore. *THUG* was the series' biggest attempt at reinvention as well as evolution, although some of its additions are hard to think of as progressions. In place of the previous career structures, where stages focused on achieving goals purely for the sake of applying skill, was a narrative. A rags-to-riches yarn of a small-town skater graduating from greenhorn to grandmaster, it's a story that would return almost wholesale in *THAW*. With a need to push this plot through play, the goals presented to the player felt weaker; a deterrent to those who came to the series to get lost in a jungle of combos, not live a skate-flavoured American dream. Also new was the ability to travel on-foot and clamber, thanks to the ability to step off the board and walk, jump, dangle from ledges and shimmy along them. A day/night cycle was implemented too, not one that added any kind of atmosphere to the gameworld, but just made things harder to see after dusk.

*THUG 2* muddied some of those troubled waters. Its storyline went from yokel hero to zany nonsense, with a World Destruction Tour featuring the majority of the cast from MTV's Jackass. It again offered some fuzzy, poor goals but much-improved level design and a colour scheme much livelier than *THUG*'s drabness. Instead of the disastrous vehicles, unwieldy 'guest' skaters were introduced, replete with sets of their own goals, and were truly uncontrollable: a wheelchair, a bucking bronco on wheels, a go-kart and more, each and every one of them an affront to the responsive precision of the skateboard. But it still brought new nutrition for seasoned *THPS*ers, thanks to a slow-mo special bar, which proved itself vital for tackling the more challenging gaps in the intricate and elevated Skatopia stage, one of the best levels in the series.

Both titles illustrated the same problem: stories and games are hard to wed when both parties have little in common. The results are often nothing but snack food, a sandwich of interactivity pressed between two slices of plot progression. Going by many a modern title, a good videogame story often remains a good story when retold without the videogame; it maybe needn't do so, but has often done so in recent times. For whatever reasons, this requirement has stumped games such as *Super Monkey Ball 2* – whose introduction of a narrative somehow led to stages that veered









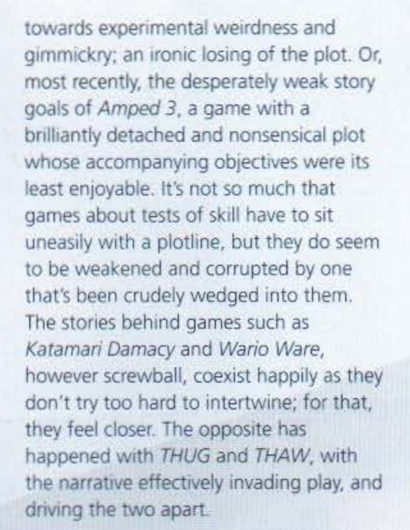
There's no shortage of bonus content in *Tony Hawk's* games, even if it does largely revolve around hidden characters that aren't of much interest; *THPS3*, for example, has some 70 skaters tucked away. A reliable goodie unlocked when finishing a *Tony Hawk's* game is a 'scrape' video of real-world tricks gone wrong







The first ever *Tony Hawk's* game featured a pair of stages centred on an interesting idea that was never revisited: The Mall and Downhill Jam (above) were wraparound stages, set on a slope that returned the player to the start if they reached the end, while introducing them to the joy of a high-speed trick line



towards experimental weirdness and gimmickry; an ironic losing of the plot. Or, most recently, the desperately weak story goals of *Amped 3*, a game with a brilliantly detached and nonsensical plot whose accompanying objectives were its least enjoyable. It's not so much that games about tests of skill have to sit uneasily with a plotline, but they do seem to be weakened and corrupted by one that's been crudely wedged into them. The stories behind games such as *Katamari Damacy* and *Wario Ware*, however screwball, coexist happily as they don't try too hard to intertwine; for that, they feel closer. The opposite has happened with *THUG* and *THAW*, with the narrative effectively invading play, and driving the two apart.

Still, the appeal of the *Tony Hawk* series has never been truly dampened. That appeal is most visible in Free Skate mode, an option available in each game where you can indulge in a downtime of lazy, objective-free improvisation and play with the furniture of each stage; a pastime that's almost relaxing in its Zen-like repetition and focus. And it's still




The two-minute timed runs ended when the clock reached zero. Unless, that is, the player was in the middle of a combo; this opportunity led to frantic last-ditch bids for back-breaking scores that, thanks to their nothing-to-lose nature, would often throw up some striking point totals

there in the nucleus of every *Tony Hawk* game, however tangled up in a narrative they may be.

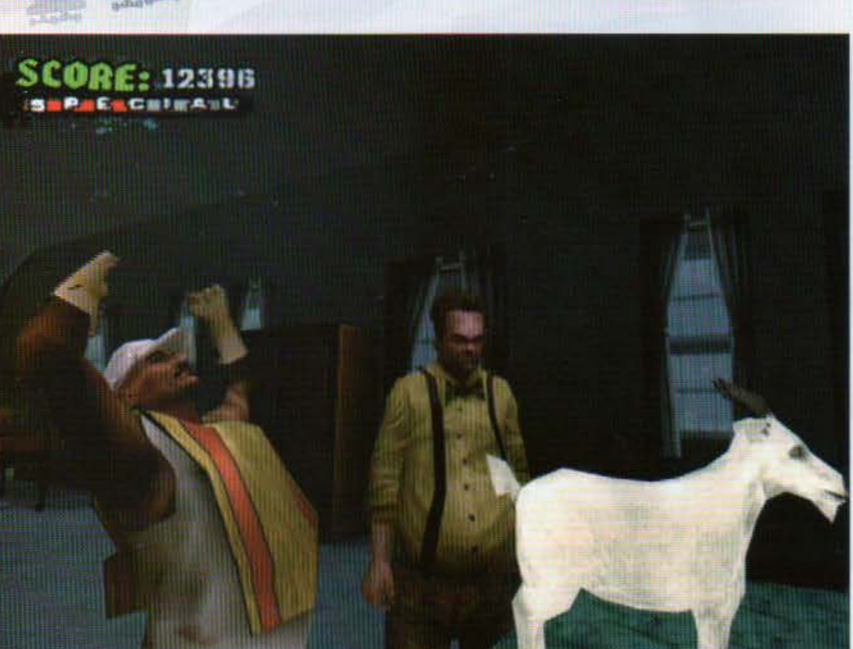
**While there are** numerous score-based games that *THPS3* can stand shoulder to shoulder with, as with any genre-defining title, many queued behind the *Tony Hawk* series to slipstream its success. Its imitators are many, but few took a skateboard as their weapon of

## The best Hawk's imitator – Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure – was the best because it was actually a half-brother

choice. Acclaim's *Aggressive Inline* (developed by Z-Axis, the studio behind the aforementioned *Thrasher: Skate & Destroy*) pipped *THPS4* to the post in terms of offering career stages that were free from time limits, and brought with it a handful of thoughtful stunts to add into the grind/manual/grab combo structure, but felt just too sticky to offer lasting

competition. And still they came – SCi's awful *Rolling*, Midway's inexplicably bad *Gravity Games Bike*, and, of course, Acclaim's *BMX XXX*, a crude and crass nai in the coffin of the once-bearable *Dave Mirra's* series, where anyone patient enough to tackle the game's ungainly control system was rewarded with strip-club FMV. Indeed, the best of the imitators – *Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure* – was the best because it wasn't an imitator but a half-brother. It sounds a piece of merchandising too cynical to be worthy, but its use of the *THPS4* engine and some well-realised levels offered a simplistic but engaging distraction for *Tony Hawk* addicts in rehab, an illustration of the strength of the engine at work beneath it all. And that was the trouble with Tony Hawk wannabes – they could copy the control system and levels rich with trick-friendly props, but just couldn't set the two together in as flush a manner as originator Neversoft, which built the idea from the inside looking out, and not the other way around. It's worth noting, too, that some of the more intriguing extreme sports titles to follow in the *Pro Skater* wake were again from Activision, as part of a short-lived umbrella brand – Activision O2 – that produced *Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer* and *Wakeboarding Unleashed*, games with interesting ideas that were never followed up with sequels.

And now, with *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland*, the series has succumbed to the free-roaming vogue, a promise that feels unfulfilled in this latest iteration. Many were, quite rightly, expecting an entire state of skate: *GTA: JSR*, a seamless expanse of urban furniture that would see the discovery of staggering lines and make movement in any direction a continual joy. Instead, thanks most likely to a punishing annual schedule, the result was merely a collection of typically themed *Tony Hawk* stages, interconnected by lengthy tunnels instead of loading screens. That feeling of freedom never quite materialised.








They're thin on the ground, but one or two hidden scenes were tucked away in *THPS3* for anyone willing to explore the highest corners of each stage. If there's a theme here, it's one that's fixated on sleaze



An aerial view of *THPS3*'s Los Angeles stage (left). From this perspective, it seems tiny. But from the perspective of the player – of how it offers a seemingly limitless range of trick lines and paths for players to utilise – it's gargantuan















So, where does a series that thrives on clarity and precision go from here? It's squeezed an incredible amount of functionality from current-gen joypads, with little room left for the addition of new features. Not to mention an imminent new generation of consoles and a culture of development focused on visuals with rich textures, organic curves and dense busyness – is there a natural progression in all of this for the series that won't feel out of joint with the spirit of its forebears? Is the recent DS instalment of the *Tony Hawk* franchise – *American Sk8land* – and its cel-shaded, stylised look a way to keep things impressive without losing the clean geometry? Would Nintendo's Revolution be the perfect place for the series to be reborn, with a beautiful new control method? In the current direction the series is headed, the cutscenes will improve, the useful gameworld will expand, sure, but that's not what it's about. The unfulfilled sandbox promise of *American Wasteland* is an obvious destination, too. But maybe it's not a large, sweeping evolution that's needed, but just a small, well-placed change – such as *THPS3*'s revert – that could cause a revolution and bring new meaning. At a time when gaming's ambitions are as big as they've ever been, *Tony Hawk's* continues to fly the flag for a time when small changes mattered most. If its future looks uncertain – in terms of content, rather than its guaranteed appearance on retail shelves – Neversoft has already left its mark through the *Tony Hawk* series: a scattering of skate parks across Videogamesville that'll be worth visiting even when everything else is dwarfed by gleaming, epic, big-budget skyscrapers.










The handheld iterations, although rarely directly comparable to their home console equivalents, are worth a mention. After some drab 2D Game Boy Color instalments, the series proved it could still work in isometric 3D on the GBA. DS's *Tony Hawk's American Sk8land* is striking too, successfully maintaining a unique style

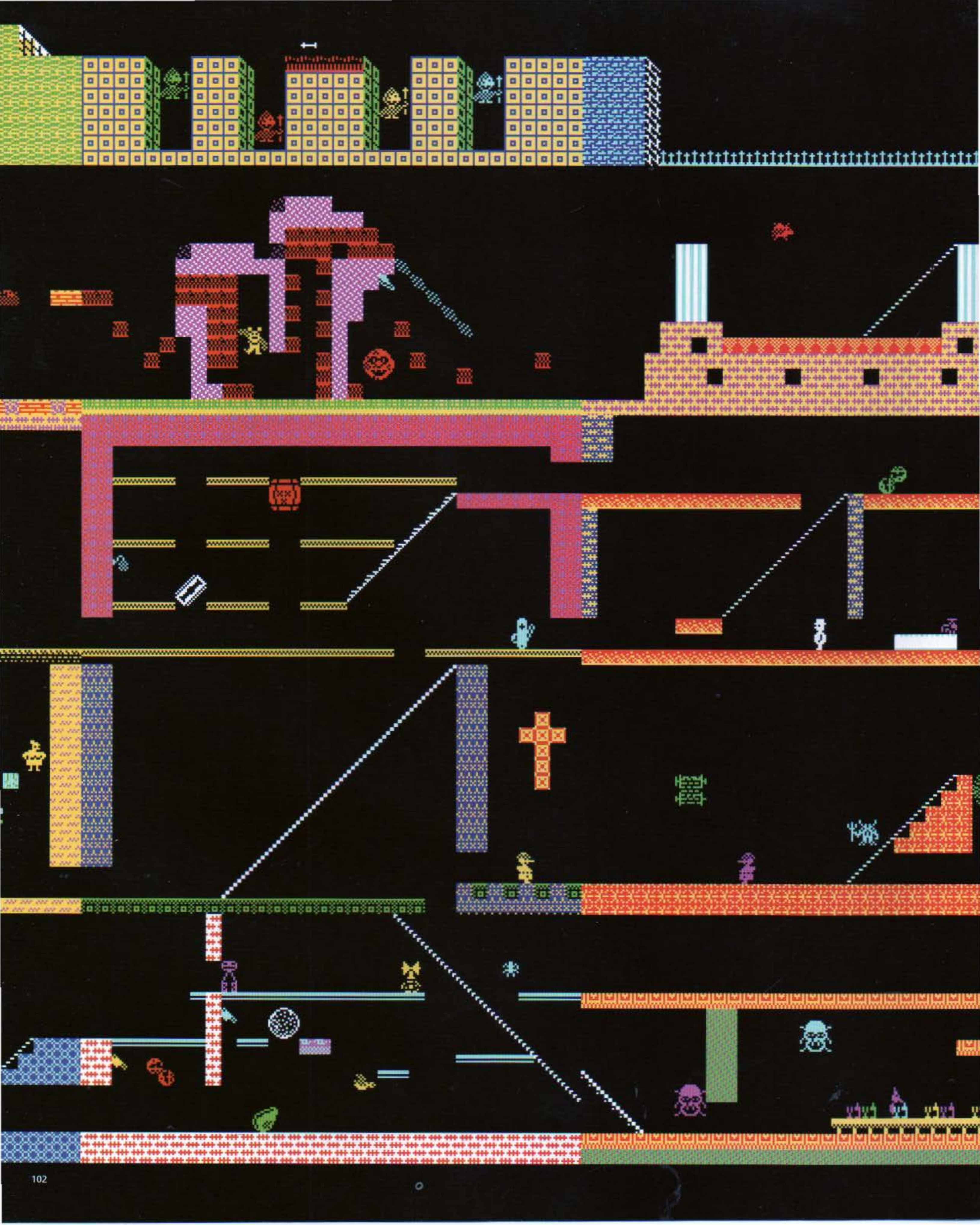


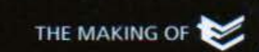
## CUSTOM'S LAST STAND

Customisation options have become an abundant but arguably cosmetic part of the *Tony Hawk* games. Create-a-trick, create-a-goal, create-a-skater, create-a-tag, create-a-park – aspects that offer plenty of options, but ultimately feel inconsequential. Best of all is the park creator, an editing tool that allows the concoction of entire playgrounds from the game's basic toolbox of props and themes. Even with the best of wills, it's tricky to craft something on the scale and complexity of the game's own levels and, like the character-creation option, it's best used to invent something that is throwaway and ludicrous. Later *Tony Hawk's* games appearing on PS2 took the option further by allowing players to map a picture of their own face on to that of a custom avatar.



While the most basic of in-game trick salvos would be seen as a special move in reality, the series has offered increasing numbers of point-rich OTT specials that are often low-risk and are hardly more complex than most standard grabs and flips – they are an essential exploit for those aiming for stratospheric scores





# THE MAKING OF...
## JET SET WILLY

The elusive Mr Smith gives us a guided tour through his most famous creation – Jet Set Willy's mansion

FORMAT: **ZX SPECTRUM 48K** PUBLISHER: **SOFTWARE PROJECTS** DEVELOPER: **MATTHEW SMITH** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1984**

Miner Willy is in The Bathroom. He's drunk and desperate for sleep, but his tyrannical housekeeper, Maria, has barred the way to the Master Bedroom. Her foot taps judgementally and an outstretched arm commands her remorseful employer to clear up the debris of a debauched evening's entertainment before slumber can carry him towards tomorrow's inevitable hangover. The party is definitely over.

**Matthew Smith** is in The Kitchen. We warm ourselves on this winter morning in his chilly house by the gas hob, before settling down in The Living Room to watch a DVD containing a playthrough of *Jet Set Willy*, Smith's ambitious follow-up to *Manic Miner*. He is going to talk us through the game's creation.

"Yeah, I did The Bathroom and the Top Landing first and did most of the testing here," Smith recalls. "Making sure the stairs worked and the creatures moved OK." He points to a Ladder Bug, a purple, gawping blob atop elongated legs, so dubbed because it evolved from the stepladders he drew for *Manic Miner* and smiles at the spinning Swiss Army knife, before exclaiming "Andre!" on entering The Kitchen, as if he's greeting an old friend. "Ah, he's from a little game I did for Computer & Video Games magazine – a type-in called *Andre's Night Off*," Smith explains, the cleaver-brandishing mad chef being an amalgam of TV cooks at the time.

Willy traverses between the Back Stairway and Cold Store, in a section Smith based on the Wacky Amoebatrons cavern from *Manic Miner*, but split over two rooms. The screens flick instantly from one to another. "The code for *Jet Set Willy* was packed but not compressed," explains Smith. "With *Manic Miner* it wasn't even packed – everything was in memory all the time, 1K for each screen – but with this I packed it into 256 bytes for each room. It was quick to decode. People are amazed I got so many screens in, but *Jet Set Willy 2* had double the amount."

**The broken bottle is worth two items. Smith squints and shakes his head. "Christ, I must have put two items on top of each other"**

Miner Willy is now scouring The Beach, avoiding partially buried crabs and happily discovering that the broken bottle he picks up is worth two items. Smith squints and shakes his head. "Christ, I must have put two on



## WILLY RETURNS?

The plot of *Jet Set Willy* is based on the presumption that Willy made a fortune from his mining exploits in the first game, which he then squandered on the high life. We wonder if there's something of a parallel with Smith's own experience of those heady days in the first half of the '80s? "I did get £30,000 from *Manic Miner*, but by the time I got that out of Bug Byte, I was owed another £30,000, so yeah, I spent a lot of it on drink, women and motorbikes," admits Smith (above). "But I never saw a penny from *JSW*, even though it sold over half a million on the Speccy, and that's not counting overseas sales. Is Willy's a cautionary tale? Well, it was going to be, if I'd completed the third chapter, called *Miner Willy Meets The Taxman*. Rags to riches and back to rags."

Smith had already sketched out the next instalment of Willy's story, a scrolling platformer, featuring ten tax offices built on top of each other, stretching back through the ages to the Romans, the first taxmen. He's still got the whole design in his head and is confident he could convert it easily to the Game Boy or a suitable mobile phone. Any nostalgic developers out there who'd fund the final leap of Britain's most famous 8bit hero?







top of each other..." This momentary regret passes as Smith goes on to explain the swinging rope above Willy's head. "It's my favourite bit of the game," he beams, "the only thing I like more about *JSW* than *Manic Miner*. I had a table of numbers and I'd take a bit off each one to make it swing nice. But I ran out of numbers, so at the end it has this little kink. I won't mess with that, I thought. I like the kink."

Big smile, big exhale. Willy ventures on and is confronted by the Banyan Tree, a brutally difficult challenge, once considered impossible by many young gamers. Smith acknowledges it was 'bloody tricky' and describes the 'hold jump and squirt out' method, giving an insight into the playtesting process. "I tested every room to make sure you could complete it – and this one took me days – but once I'd proved any screen was possible, that was it. It was staying. That's why there's no random numbers in *JSW*. Everything resets when you enter each screen, all the arrows enter from the same place at the same time and all the creatures move in the same pattern. That was important because of the way I'd done the collision detection – if *anything* collided on screen, *you* would die."

The dynamic of designing, coding and testing had its own lolloping momentum. Smith would draw rooms by hand on large sheets of graph paper, six rooms to a page. (He actually hung on to these first drafts of the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired mansion right up until the mid '90s, despite his mother's dog having urinated on them during the previous decade.) He would then type the relevant numbers into a Tandy TRS-80 Model 4 and any actual coding was done on this machine, before being 'squirted', a favourite Smith phrase, on to the target machine: the Sinclair Spectrum.

"I got it down to one minute for a graphical change and two minutes if I was changing a line of code and it needed assembling," Smith recalls with pride. "Then I'd have a look on the Speccy to see if it worked and was worth keeping. Yeah, it was slow and it didn't help that I hadn't got an editor, like with *Manic Miner*. It did drag on and I was losing my patience..."

**Unlike Smith's first** bestseller, *Manic Miner*, which was created in a testosterone-sustained eight-week block of night-time coding at his mother's house in Wallasey, Merseyside, the development of its sequel took eight tortuous months. Smith had left previous publisher Bug Byte after becoming disgruntled with a lack of royalty payments due to him and had set up Software Projects with another former employee, Alan Maton. "I was still coding at my mum's house," he remembers. "Even though I was a director of Software Projects, I didn't really go into the offices. Alan would come round most days and stand behind me. And poke me."

Appropriately enough, Willy is now Up On The Battlements, a section of the mansion clearly inspired by arcade title *Hunchback*, avoiding a nasty prod from one of the guards. "Actually, that's supposed to be Dave Ward," says Smith, pointing to the particularly frantic sentries on the Rescue Esmeralda screen, before explaining how he'd done a *Pac-Man* clone on the VIC-20 for Ward's short-lived Spectrum Games Limited publishing house, before he went on to found Ocean Software. Apparently, the sunglasses and mad professor hair tufts are a dead giveaway.

Willy's mansion was full of such nods to Smith's real-world experience. We Must Perform A Quirkafleeg alludes to his fondness

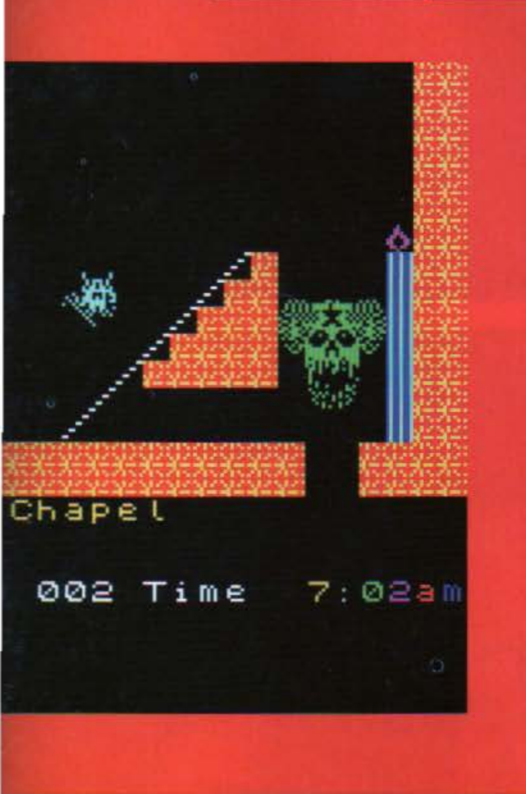
Crash magazine claimed that, by using a certain cheat, a ship would eventually turn up to take Willy away to mysterious islands. It wouldn't. Derek Rowson made the myth become reality in *JSW2*

The demon was impressively menacing, considering Smith had only four frames of animation and one colour for each creature. The star was meant to be upside down, mind






The Off Licence screen was understandably filled with evidence of Willy's wild night. "I was enjoying my booze back then," smiles Smith







Based on St John's Tower on the banks of the Mersey, Watch Tower was just one example of Smith's locality affecting his game architecture

for the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers comics (and their herbs of choice) and Emergency Generator, complete with airborne pig, is an obvious homage to Pink Floyd's Animals album cover. We wonder how pirouetting rabbits, wobbling jellies and the entire cast of inanimate objects brought disturbingly to life fitted into Smith's everyday existence. "That may have been the mushrooms," he offers, helpfully.

Which may explain the undulating offspring of *Centipede* and *Pac-Man* which now faces Willy in The Attic. It marks a far greater terror, though – the infamous Attic Bug. "There's no error checking in the code, so all the data has to be perfect," confesses Smith. "There's 60 rooms, but memory for 64 and I just couldn't get the last few working. I think the problem was the hard disc driver on the Tandy was loading into high memory, even though the manual said it was supposed to load into low memory, and that was writing over those last four rooms. It was three days before it was going to the duplicators and I thought 60 rooms was three times as many as *Manic Miner*, so just left them out, but you can jump into one of the 'dead rooms' accidentally. It's somewhere off the Mega Tree [Smith makes a vague hand gesture over to the right] and I think an arrow fires offscreen or something and then fucks things up if you go to The Attic afterwards. I'm sorry, I didn't bother chasing it down too hard… it was just so near the end."

**The 'dead rooms'** are not to be confused with the 'death room', the Entrance To Hades screen, which inquisitive players can stumble upon only to find all of their lives swiftly evaporating. The numerous satanic visages, based on Iron Maiden's beast mascot Eddie, are balanced with a selection of religious imagery, though, in The Chapel, The Forgotten Abbey and Priests' Hole. "Brideshead Revisited had been on that year and it coloured my notion of what a country house should contain," adds Smith.

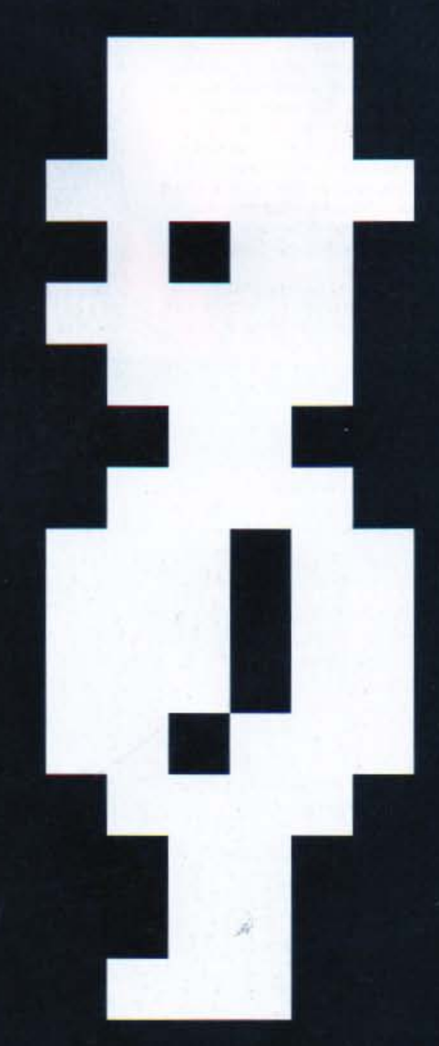
## "I call myself an impressionist," Smith states proudly. "I don't think anyone could represent anything in 8bit like I could"

As Willy heads up the Mega Tree, an idea that would grow into a future (unfinished) Smith project, we admire the foliage strewn across Out On A Limb. "I call myself an impressionist," Smith states proudly. "I don't think anyone could represent anything in 8bit like I could. That's the secret of my success… I should be doing sprites for phone games, not mucking about with 3D!" He picks up the nearby N-Gage hopefully, before cursing its dead SIM card.

The item count reads 82 and so Willy heads for the final barrier – The Nightmare Room. Confronted by multiple incarnations of his nemesis Maria (based on a Greek woman who lived across the road from his mum, according to Smith) and a Pythonesque giant foot, Willy is unexpectedly metamorphosed into a flying pig.

"I just thought it was funny," says Smith. "The pig was drawn so it was exactly the same height and width as Willy at the crucial moments. All the collision detection was properly bitmapped – you could get a bit of colour clash at times, but you only died if the pixels touched."

And so with the epic journey complete, Willy enters his Master Bedroom, Maria no longer barring the entrance, only to realise his stomach can no longer contain the amount of alcohol consumed and makes a final mad dash to The Bathroom. "Yeah, I suppose that was the end of a lot of my evenings back then," smiles Smith, as we watch poor Willy with his head firmly thrust down the toilet, his legs protruding from the bowl, kicking wildly. "And look, the chain is even flushing!"



# Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

**COMPANY NAME:** Bigbig Studios Ltd

**DATE FOUNDED:** 2001

**NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 21

**STUDIO HEADS:** Jonathan Webb (MD, below), Richard Ogden (game design director, below right), Simon Bursey (art director, bottom right)







**URL:** www.bigbigstudios.com

**SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**
*Pursuit Force* (PSP, 2005)








Bigbig's debut, influenced by Taito's *Chase HQ* series, is one of the strongest actioners on PSP






**LOCATION:**
Leamington Spa, Warwickshire

**CURRENT PROJECTS:**
Unannounced title for SCEE

**ABOUT THE STUDIO**

"Bigbig Studios was founded in 2001 by four ex-Codemasters employees as a subsidiary of Evolution Studios – creators of the official *World Rally Championship* games and the forthcoming *MotorStorm* for PlayStation 3.

"Through development of demos and preproduction games, Bigbig has established a large technology base for PlayStation 2 and PlayStation Portable and forged a close working relationship with Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. This has resulted in a streamlined development process and a comprehensive in-house tool chain that allows us to work at an efficient rate for a small team. The ultimate outcome of this is the recently completed *Pursuit Force* for the PSP which has been successful over the Christmas period – reaching number three on release in the UK PSP charts just below *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories*.

"Bigbig has expanded slowly and carefully to its current staff level, ensuring that we employ exceptional individuals who will fit comfortably into our friendly and informal but hard working atmosphere. We are now expanding the company further as we continue the beginning stages of our next (as yet undisclosed) project."



# Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

# Unify and conquer

**As its value continues to grow, the middleware scene is becoming less disparate. Time to look at how the last 12 months have transformed it**



John Austin started the year as the chief executive of graphics firm NDL, but following its merger became a senior vice president of Emergent Game Technologies

Even viewed in the slippery way encouraged by hindsight, it's clear that EA's acquisition of Criterion (despite occurring in 2004) set the theme for 2005. That the world's biggest publisher spent a rumoured $100 million buying the world's biggest middleware company underlined the importance it placed on improving the efficiency of game development.

Equally, that no other publisher has followed EA's lead since says as much about the market-leading reputation of Criterion's RenderWare tools as the failure of many publishers' management to understand the challenges ahead.

One classic example is US graphics provider NDL. Set up in 1983, it was characteristic of many middleware companies in that, despite supplying good-quality technology to customers such as Firaxis, Mythic and Irrational Games, it had found growth limited by lack of investment. Yet the search for compatible companies to join up with proved fruitless throughout 2004.

"Even prior to EA buying Criterion, we'd realised we needed to be more of a force in the market. We needed to have a larger capability than just graphics," says **John Austin**, who started off the year as NDL's CEO.

## If nothing else, 2005 has been a year in which companies have set out to prove that more is more



Paul Kruszewski ended 2005 as CTO of Engenuity Technologies, the company that spent $2.7 million acquiring Biographic, the AI middleware provider he founded





What the deal did do, however, was galvanise Criterion's competitors into action. For one thing, it certainly improved the value of their companies, as well as providing a huge opportunity for sales when it became clear EA wouldn't let other developers use new versions of RenderWare. More important, perhaps, was the realisation that the combination of two good pieces of technology within a single company structure could generate much more business in future. If nothing else, 2005 has been a year in which companies have set out to prove that more is more.



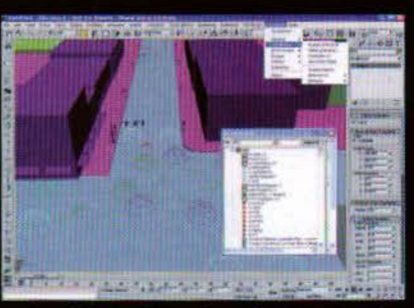
SN Systems' tools allow coders to really get to grips with consoles' processing potential – which is why Sony decided to buy the company and roll its experience into the critical area of PlayStation 3 development kits

Then, in August 2005, NDL announced it was merging with Emergent Game Technologies – a company with its own interesting history. Starting out as an online game hosting company called Butterfly.net in the internet boom years, it ended up running out of cash, customers and momentum. Following restructuring, refinancing, a change of direction and a new name, it too was looking for possible partners. Austin claimed it became clear, despite their seemingly variant product lines, that both companies had a lot in common.

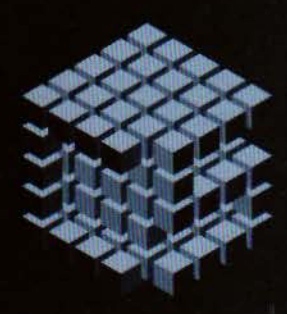
"Emergent shared our vision about development and we started to get very excited about what we could do together," says Austin, who now takes the role of senior vice president, business development at Emergent.

The results of the merger will be seen for the first time at the Game Developers Conference in March. As well as NDL's graphics engine, Gamebryo, other components are expected to include automatic testing and build tools, online game hosting, backend servers, and online management technology. It seems





Despite spending $182 million to buy its rival Alias, Autodesk says it won't be dropping products such as Maya. Instead, the firm will work to improve integration between Alias' products and those in its own range such as 3DS Max (left). Biographic's AI.implant (right) allows developers to create more believable game characters. It also has been used in military and industrial simulations, and it was this which encouraged Engenuity Technologies to buy the company





As a graphics company, NDL's Gamebryo engine was its core product – but thanks to its merger with Emergent, many other types of development tools will be available

to be a great example of the synergy that can result when two companies join together. Or as Austin himself describes the process: "This certainly isn't your daddy's NDL."

Another middleware company hoping to find additional strength in the arms of a better financed suitor during 2005 was Canadian AI provider BioGraphic Technologies. Operating at the cutting edge of artificial intelligence, its AI.implant product had been used in a number of games including Midway's *Psi-Ops* as well as CG production houses such as Lucasfilm. But as a small startup with limited staff and resources, it found the gaming middleware market tough to break into. Indeed, prior to its $2.7 million deal acquisition by fellow Canadian outfit Engenuity Technologies, the company's strategy had been shifted by its customers, with the majority of AI.implant licences sold into the burgeoning military simulation market.

And it was this, in part, which attracted Engenuity, which boasts industrial clients such as Airbus, Boeing, Honda and Lockheed Martin. The other carrot was the potential to extend Engenuity's off-the-shelf simulation product STAGE by integrating AI.implant to provide the ability to control the behaviours of virtual characters.

For Biographic's founder and president **Paul Kruszewski**, who now takes the role of Engenuity's CTO, the deal is good news for its game customers too. "The only change I can see is our ability to respond to their needs will improve and we'll have more resources for research and development," he says. "Longer term, I hope it will mean even more interesting things for the game community as it should provide a golden opportunity to get to some of those features we have always wanted to add but couldn't due to time and resource limitations."

## More 2005 deals wrapped up

### Art rivals conjoined

In terms of finance, the biggest deal of the year was the $182 million cash acquisition of Alias, the developer of the Maya 3D modelling and animation software, by Autodesk, provider of its 3DS Max rival. It was also a big deal in terms of competition, with the combined market share of Maya and 3DS Max in game development reckoned to be over 75 per cent. The other main player in the market is Softimage's XSI package.

Yet with a wider range of products and annual revenues of $1.2 billion compared to Alias' $83 million, Autodesk has always had the potential to throw its weight around – something it emphasised at the beginning of 2005 with a reorganisation of its media and entertainment division (which used to be called Discreet) into the main Autodesk corporate structure. In many ways, the Alias deal was the logical outworking of this.

But what game developers will be interested in is how the deal will affect ongoing support and future releases, especially of Maya and animation package MotionBuilder. At present, Autodesk says it will continue to support all Alias products, and that integration between 3DS Max and Maya will be increased. The fear, however, is that such a dominant position means that after years of aggressive price competition between Autodesk and Alias, the cost of 3DS Max and Maya licences are now set to rise.

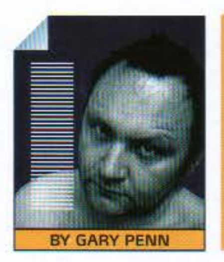
### PlayStation 3 coding streamlined

While it was playing up the graphical potential of PlayStation 3 with its E3 demos, Sony was also having to think hard about how common-or-garden developers could ever hope to match such output. One part of the plan was revealed when it announced it would be bundling evaluation versions of physics engines from Havok and Ageia, as well as Epic's Unreal 3 engine, with PlayStation 3's development kits. The more significant part of the deal, however, came with acquisition of Bristol-based programming tools company SN Systems. It's provided programming tools such as compilers, debuggers and linkers for hardware going back to the days of the Sega Mega Drive, as well as current platforms like PlayStation 2, PSP and GameCube. Now brought into the Sony fold, SN Systems' tools, such as its ProDG suite, have already started shipping to enable developers to better get to grips with the exotic collection of processors that make up PlayStation 3's Cell CPU.

### Security experts secured

Despite being the main supplier of disc security for PC CDs and DVDs, 2005 saw anti-piracy company Macrovision shell out $34 million for secure online distribution vendor Trymedia. The main reason? The ongoing decline in the value of protecting physical media, as the size of online entertainment markets grows.

"The acquisition of Trymedia is the embodiment of our strategy to move from pure protection into the enablement business," explains **Tom DuBois**, Macrovision's senior director of merchandising and marketing for Trymedia. "Macrovision wants to provide a technology infrastructure for game distribution that bridges the physical/digital divide. Copy protection remains a prerequisitive but it's not an end in itself." The result will be an integrated digital rights management solution for physical and online media which uses Macrovision's SafeDisc anti-piracy solution within Trymedia's ActiveMARK flexible distribution channel.


BY GARY PENN

# MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

## The line between work and play

I live by the sea, and half of my back garden doesn't get much sun, especially during the winter months. Those two seemingly disconnected facts result in a build up of green crud on the concrete floor. It's not even an attractive shade. It's slippery when wet and absorbs much-needed light. It's a bastard to shift and ought to be done often but the incentive to act is negligible.

It takes a slip and a fall or a close shave – danger, basically – to motivate me into action. It takes a broom, buckets of diluted Jeyes fluid (which at least smells stimulating) and too much effort to clean the scum-caked space.

I mention this because I changed the way I feel about cleaning my courtyard. Now I have a feeling of power and significance – now that the responsibility and tedium have diminished because I made work play. Not a game, as the maxim dictates – just play.

> The purifying jet of water is hard and loud and rips through the muck like starved rats through fatty flesh

What made the difference was a cheap but effective piece of equipment to turn my garden hose into a bad motherfucker. But it's not just a tool to make life easier (it does) – it's extreme, exciting and dramatic. It's a toy. The job still takes time but that time passes so much faster with so much more spectacle. The purifying jet of water is hard and loud and rips through the muck like starved rats through fatty flesh.

There are fine lines between work and play and games and I can't claim to truly understand them. I know of no clear-cut rules or tools to help shape ideas into play. I don't mean magic words and panaceas but practical processes to help take, say, the task of making the bed and turn that from work into play and ultimately games. Not necessarily good play or games – just obvious amendments or additions that would clearly delineate work and play.

Turning the unpleasant into a game isn't always enough to make it more palatable. Challenges and jeopardy are all very well (sticks tend to be more effective than carrots) but what makes all the difference for me is making an obvious difference, satisfying exaggeration – drama rather than a crisis to make the mundane more exciting and compelling. Not just dramatic roles, themes and contexts but the use of dramatic performances from all concerned – especially toy actions and activities.

I find it useful to think of all toys as performers, whether they are selectors, abstract tokens, machines or distinctive action figures, whether motivated by rules or real players. They all have actions to perform and they must perform them with appropriate dramatic flair and not small, timid, apologetic movements. I also find videogames surprisingly lacking in physical, visible and audible drama. Recently, war games such as *Call Of Duty* have provided the most drama. The likes of *Ico*, *Half-Life 2* and *Resident Evil 4* also have their fair share of dramatic moments (the chainsaw dispatch representing an all-time high in satisfying player toy removal). But the toys still often feel quite cheap. Stilted, wooden, obviously fake.

There typically aren't enough plausible impossibilities (which are regarded as more believable than implausible possibilities) – not enough unlikely coincidences and seemingly ludicrous but surprisingly satisfying close calls – the kind of shit that my parents used to chide for being ridiculous and unrealistic but is the staple of all good drama (24 being a prime example of its best and worst).

Come to think of it, it's not just a lack of drama but a lack of good, solid, smooth, dramatic virtual performances and interactive experiences. Even the very latest computer and videogames tend to be soft, especially when real physics are involved. Hollywood uses wires to pull its stunt players through the air at high speed. Videogame victims tend to simply crumple to the ground, which seems all the more bizarre in a medium capable of anything.

There was a time when animation, the closest relative to videogames (in so much as everything is built from the ground up), was sedate and sweet and cosy and soulless, until the likes of Hanna and Barbera, Tex Avery and Chuck Jones found their stride and time, space and the rules of reality went out the window.

Those slow, smooth, insipid early cartoons did everything with perceived accuracy and reality. The pace and physicality picked up significantly over the next decade and the abnormality hit '11'. What had previously been so soft and slow (and safe and sickeningly sweet) became hard and fast (and nasty). Then commercialism and rationalisation reared their heads and artistry and spiralling budgets were brought crashing down to earth. (Our industry would do well to learn from that history.)

The trouble is, unlike in cartoons and the movies, in computer and videogames it has to be possible to interfere with the drama, either at a low level or at a high level to make the difference. Elaborate reactions to your interactions might get in the way or you might get in their way or they might just go unnoticed. Compressing time and space into robust and manageable portions is a bitch.

*Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki*




BY TIM GUEST

# THE GUEST COLUMN

## Crime and punishment

Nimrod Yaffle broke the rules. He offended someone, and he received a message from the rulers of the world that he was being punished. The world around him flickered and changed. Where once was a whole world, suddenly all he could see was an endless cornfield. He walked the rows for what seemed like days, under a full moon that never seemed to wane. No one else came. He found a tractor, but the tractor was insanely slow. He found a TV, but all it ever played was a 1940s film about a troubled teenager trying to avoid a life of crime. Nimrod was being asked to consider the effect of his actions, but mostly what he did was drive the tractor. Also, he kept half an eye out for the Children of the Corn.

In medieval times, banishment from your community was the worst possible punishment; it cut you off from your collective self, which held both your earthly and heavenly connections. It was a fate worse than death. Ever since, police, moral philosophers, and criminals themselves have all wrestled with the thorny problem of what to do with those who break society's moral codes and repeatedly hurt others. Our attitudes to punishment evolved. When banishment stopped being a punishment worse than death, we switched to using death – now seen as the most extreme exclusion. Later we tried the experiment of having thieves deported to Australia.

> **"When banishment stopped being a punishment worse than death, we switched to using death – seen as the most extreme exclusion"**

Nowadays, if you broke the law and the government gave you a one-way Qantas flight, you'd be reaching for your cork-swinging hat. That's because our social conditions and needs have changed; we're no longer tied into the body of our local community, so that to be removed from it is no longer to be cut from your heart. So now we exclude people 'humanely'; we hold people – in prisons, in detention centres, in borstals – inside the world but outside society. Murderers get imprisoned or deported. Ghosts get sucked up by Bill Murray and kept inside a toaster. Whoever you are, society's greatest punishment is still to remove you from itself.

A few months ago I wrote about a dwarven protest in *World Of WarCraft*'s Ironforge. A hundred dwarves stripped to their underwear, ran into the seat of dwarf government, and refused to leave. They were temporarily banned from the world; a similar protest in *Star Wars Galaxies* resulted in the perpetrators being randomly teleported around the universe (a punishment the Emperor himself might think up). At the time, it seemed a shame there weren't more creative solutions to those who broke a world's moral code – why not put them in virtual stocks for a virtual while?

Well, virtual worlds develop faster than the real world – that's part of their purpose and their promise. Blizzard is still banning (18,000 people in December alone). But once again *Second Life*, Linden Lab's rapidly growing alternate universe, has developed an even more creative solution. Well, the company didn't come up with it first; initially it was science fiction. The idea came from a classic Twilight Zone in which an omnipotent child rules a town in terror. Anyone who offends his childish sense of what's right is banished to the 'cornfield', never to be seen again.

Nimrod knew he would be seen again. Othe than worrying about the Children of the Corn, he laughed the whole time. He even tried unsuccessfully to create a script that would crash the world – an echo of the crime that had him teleported into the cornfield in the first place. Nimrod's crime wasn't too serious, and nor was his punishment. He was, temporarily, cut off from his heavenly connections, but he still had his earthly ones (he posted pictures of the cornfield on *Second Life* bulletin boards). Around the same time, more serious transgression of the rules – both the *Second Lif* terms of service, and also real-world computer hacking laws – led to the possibility of more serious punishment. Recently, after repeated warnings and some changes to the world, some residents continued to misbehave. Linden Lab felt that real-world hacking laws were being broken. The company called in the FBI.

The cornfield is an interesting start. The challenge now for virtual worlds is to mature their ideas about punishment from these first steps into methods radical even for the real world. The real-world response to crime has many flaws – prisons become colleges and communities for criminals, and our real-world crime rate stays roughly the same. Modern criminologists suggest that a more local punishment – what they call a 'virtual prison', with restricted movement within the community – can be more effective. Even more radical approaches involve regular contact with the criminal's victims. These might be doubly effective in our virtual life, where relationships are the realest things. Might we soon see virtual house arrest, where the offender's only contact is with people who were hurt by their actions? And, if this were to work, might this begin to affect rehabilitation policies in the real world?

*Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Grant*





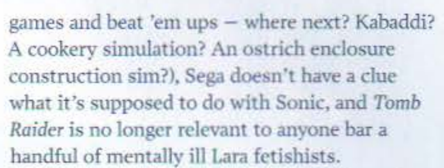
BY MR BIFFO

# BIFFOVISION

## Character building

There was something missing from the Xbox 360 launch line-up (bonus points to the witty wag who shouted "Good games"): a single marketable, iconic character. No Sonic, or Mario, or – let's face it – even a Pac-Man. Heck, I'd have taken that witless, purple, fire-chuffer Spyro The Dragon over charisma-free throwbacks like Joanna Dark and That Girl From *Kameo*. To whit: where have all our characters gone? Where once distinctive giants bestrode the industry, swinging their massive, luminous jockstraps, I'd now struggle to name a single game character created in the last five years. Even the legends are apparently failing to contain mid-life crises or drink problems, beset by over-familiarity, under-familiarity, or their insecure creators' wholesale dismissal of what once made them great. Mario is being stretched ever more thinly (we've had baseball, racing, golf, tennis, football, board games and beat 'em ups – where next? Kabaddi? A cookery simulation? An ostrich enclosure construction sim?), Sega doesn't have a clue what it's supposed to do with Sonic, and *Tomb Raider* is no longer relevant to anyone bar a handful of mentally ill Lara fetishists.

These characters were once symbols, and statements of intent. Mario sold Nintendo as a family-friendly company, whereas Sonic once defined Sega as streetwise and cool. There was a time when the launch of a new Sega or Nintendo console would've been marked by the next step in the evolution of these signature franchises. If it were up to me I'd have delayed the Xbox 360 launch until *Halo 3* was ready – Master Chief being perhaps the closest we've come to a new gaming icon in recent years; the sort of corporate mascot the PlayStation brand is sorely lacking. Instead, the 360 was thrown into the public arena with one of the safest, blandest launch line-ups ever. Yet a single strong, identifiable character could've spun that perception on its rump. Only a few years ago any mainstream coverage of gaming was accompanied by a graphic of the *Tomb Raider* enchantress, or a sassy hedgehog with wagging finger. Now it's usually an indistinct *FIFA* screenshot or an out-of-context image of someone being diced by a rusty chainsaw. How many more off-the-peg gangsters, soldiers and gloriously rendered sports cars can we handle before we implode with apathy?



> "How many more off-the-peg gangsters, soldiers and gloriously rendered sports cars can we handle before we implode with apathy?"

What makes a strong, iconic, game character? It's probably not any one thing, but like a house of cards removal of any single element means the icon crumbles. There are probably a few obvious – but rarely followed – rules worth stating. Make the characters distinct: there's a good reason why the characters in The Simpsons don't look like the characters in South Park. And there's a very good reason why Joanna Dark will never make the same cultural impact as the *Tomb Raider* star; because she looks like any one of a hundred watered-down Lara Croft clones. Likewise any of *Kameo*'s woefully bland and clichéd characters. The simpler the better. All great cartoon characters are recognisable in silhouette, from Bart Simpson to Mickey Mouse.

Make the characters' world reflect the characters: this is precisely where Sega is going wrong with Sonic. Back in the day, Sonic looked like he lived in the Green Hill Zone. Nowadays every Sonic game sticks him in a semi-photorealistic city, and the contrast is jarring. Similarly, Lara Croft has never worked as well once the franchise dragged her out of dusty tombs and into the harsh glare of street lights.

Ensure the character can do stuff that no other game character can: one strong, simple, original, iconic gameplay concept is all we ask. Give them a theme tune. Whatever happened t great theme music in games? When was the las time we got anything as memorable as the *Zeld* theme, or the *Tetris* music? Make them format-specific. They're just not as special when they're spread across more than one system.

Think about what you're trying to say with your character: I'm not for a second advocating that anyone try and promote some sort of political agenda with a game character, but onc upon a time the big game characters were synonymous with their host systems. Sonic sold Sega's dream that the Mega Drive was streetwise, while *Tomb Raider* made the PlayStation sexy. What is anybody trying to express with, say, *God Of War*? That the PS2 is for violent, semi-naked men in skirts?

Keep the franchise focused on its core characters: there's a good reason why the original *Street Fighter II* characters continue to endure. It was fair enough when Tails and Knuckles were introduced to Sonic's world, but his extended family has now become so big and unwieldy that Sonic himself has been obscured

The games industry doesn't have the benefi of celebrity in the way that other entertainmen industries do, and needs its characters now more than ever. You can't rely on 'celebrity' games journalists or producers to be the figureheads of the industry. We're hideously deformed social misfits to a man.

*Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television*







Issue 158

## ONLINE OFFLINE

**Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum**

**Topic: The laziest game design ever**

***GT3* is still an outstanding looking game but I managed to teach a coffee table to win me millions. Oval, Escudo, 100 laps, coffee table on the X button. Watch TV and flick back every now and again to see if you're still facing the right way. You should go into the pit lane every other lap but you can still win. Any game that lets you do that is wrong and no amount of pretty graphics can change it.**
Freethinker

**My brother fell asleep while playing the oval 100-lap section and still won (he slumped on to the controller). You know a game is lacking when you can beat it asleep!**
Monkey Element

***Rise Of The Robots*. No competition. Jump. Kick. Repeat. For Ever.**
fiskemannen

I am one of those rare beasts, an **Edge** subscriber who also works at Game. I so often read jibes levelled at Game sales assistants in your letters pages, and it is interesting to be able to see these situations from both perspectives. But I find myself writing very much on the side of the customer today.

As I write this it's the run-up to Christmas and a lot of parents and grandparents are becoming desperate to get hold of the Holy Grail right now – a pink DS *Nintendogs* pack, or, failing that, the game at least. However, as has also been the case with PSP and 360, we are told that we cannot sell these packs without adding other own-brand accessories to the bundle, sometimes up to four or five additional items. If a customer does not want, or need, these, they are turned away, unable to purchase the pack for its list price of £99. Conversely, we are not able to sell individual copies of *Nintendogs*, instead using them as incentive to drive further bundle sales.

Many despairing parents pay the extra begrudgingly, knowing they have no other opportunity to obtain a pack before the big day, while worse still, some feel genuinely grateful to be laden with unnecessary 'stocking fillers' for additional cost (one PlayStation Portable pack gave the lucky customer no fewer than three carry cases and two screen protectors!).

Am I the only one who finds this tactic galling and unfair? The subject of getting more non-gamers involved in our passion is a near constant discussion in **Edge**, and I think this is an area that has been, as yet, overlooked. If these people feel they have been unfairly treated, surely they will just avoid buying new hardware. There are countless other examples of this, but when I witnessed staff members tell people that the microphone on the DS was inadequate in order to push own-brand headphone/mic combos, I was incensed. My DS mic has been fantastic so far – perhaps I got the only good unit?

This is the first time I have ever been moved to write to **Edge**, since I am so angry at this state of affairs.
**Anonymous**

## Game currently has a non-negotiable own-brand controller included in Buzz! and EyeToy Play 3 packs – games which don't even require the official pad!

And Anonymous consequently got in touch again regarding the same topic:

Following my previous email I've now received **E158** and was amused to note your dig at 'bundle-merchants' in the Continue/Quit section. I have now read the 360 launch story, and your comments in the report, coupled with those of Kirsty Payne, have encouraged me to further communicate my disillusion.

Payne states: "Absolutely no one is forced to purchase a bundle upon launch" – this is very true, but if they decide that they do not wish to purchase the bundle deal, they are turned away, and are not able to purchase the console alone. The store I work at had a second delivery of Core packs after the initial one (which was sold through as bundles only); these have since sold, and all have been packaged as a bundle (the minimum Core bundle came to £399). Other bundles have risen higher than £800!

It is not simply a launch issue either, as I stated previously, Game is still selling *Nintendogs* and PSP packs as non-negotiable bundle deals – anyone wishing to simply purchase the Sony/Nintendo-defined PSP Value or Giga pack or *Nintendogs* pack is not given the option, and instead quoted the bundle price. Store managers have been given these orders from their regional managers, who in turn received theirs from head office. There is currently even a non-negotiable own-brand controller included in the *Buzz!* and *EyeToy Play 3* PS2 packs – games which don't even require the official pad! All bundles also include the Game Reward Card, and its £3 setup charge...

This is blatant exploitation of the high-demand/low-availability situation in the run-up to Christmas, and should not be allowed. I see no problem in offering bundle deals to customers, but it should be an option, not forced. Managers are given attachment rate and 'highest basket spend' (the largest amount taken in a single transaction) targets, which encourage them to laden the customer with more and more accessories at a higher price. It seems bizarre to me that a £209 spend on a 360 is thought of as a disappointment unless 'added-value sales' (peripherals, etc) are achieved.

No company should resort to such low tactics – especially not, as Payne is so keen to point out, the "largest UK specialist games retailer".
**Anonymous**

Despite continued denials of the practice from major retailers, widespread reports of bundling has now attracted the attention of the Office of Fair Trading. We'll keep you up to speed on its findings.




For Stinke, *Shadow Of The Colossus* is one of the rare titles which appeals to his girlfriend – even if he does have to act as the controller

Tonight I finished *Shadow Of The Colossus*, and aside from being a breathtaking gaming experience, I was amazed (even elated!) that my girlfriend took such interest in it.

Aside from an understanding of how much I was looking forward to the game, my girlfriend did not know much of anything else about the title. But like *Ico* before it, she really got into it and sat there next to me for the latter quarter of the game providing me with tips and suggestions at how to bring down the mighty colossi while I managed the controls. She even requested that I wait to fight the final colossus while she made her way back home from a stint downtown.

She absolutely loved watching me play *Ico* but the difference this time around was she wanted to affect the gameplay experience, using me as a peripheral. No doubt it was the captivating majesty of the game's art direction, and the puzzle-like gameplay in bringing down the colossi that drew her interest. But like any great piece of art, we conversed about the game after its completion, such as the sympathy we each felt for the mighty, fallen beasts as they would crumble in that slow, agonizing black spray of death.

Strange that Kenji Umeda's team's two efforts are the only games I can recall to draw similar reactions from my girlfriend, but it's certainly an interesting study nonetheless. What about these games drew her to the gameplay experience with me? Is it the obvious originality in both titles she wanted to partake in? Or perhaps the more adult-themed fantasy worlds? Would she feel compelled to take these games on herself were the controls simplified in the way Nintendo is so boldly championing with Revolution? Or is she simply content partaking as a thirdparty, with me acting as the proverbial DualShock pad, as it were?

Why not simply ask her? Well, that would ruin the moment, now, wouldn't it.
**Stinke**

I don't think anything has irritated me as much for years as the quote on page 14 of issue 158 of **Edge** where some advertising dork says "it's really about enhancing the gameplay". Bullshit.

As someone who has left retail game dev without intent to return, I'm happy to lay the sordid facts bare: I have been in meetings where an important design change that would have increased playability of a multimillion-pound game was vetoed because we already sold ad space in that area of the game.

## I have seen an important design change that would have increased playability vetoed because ad space had already been sold in that area of the game

I have personally heard the sponsoring companies haggle to get a "special mission in the game where the player has to buy a XXX phone to complete the mission". I've seen many a design decision rendered impossible because it clashes with the wishes of the in-game advertiser.

When you take ad money for a game, you don't just get a blank cheque, you don't just irritate the gamers, you actually invite the marketing dept of a thirdparty to sit in on your game design. If *Super Mario Bros* was made now, Mario would be wearing a Nike baseball cap.

If you want an idea of how games are designed now, watch those Orange commercials in the cinema. They aren't a parody – I've seen marketing guys behave exactly like that with games.

Anyway, this kind of bullshit is just another item I can add to the list on my site of the corporate crap my games do not, and never will, contain (FMV, cheesy voiceovers, unskippable intro movies, 200Mb patches...).
**Cliff Harris, www.positech.co.uk**

That's some truly scary testimony. Mario in a Nike baseball cap, though? It'd never happen. Never. Now, Mario and Ronald McDonald teaming up to promote wifi gaming, mind you...

In E157's editorial you said Microsoft are a 'bona fide pioneer'. How so? Internet connectivity? Dreamcast. On-demand content delivery? Atari, Sega and Nintendo systems all had, and dropped, this during the '80s and '90s (and I don't think I need to mention the Phantom, N-Gage or Valve's Steam). Wireless controllers? Wavebird. HDTV? Dreamcast natively displayed games at VGA. Faceplates? OK. I concede faceplates. Although I once did plaster my Master System with some stickers that came free with Mean Machines.

We know what the 360 is, **Edge**. It's a faster, prettier Xbox. It isn't a lifestyle extension or a revolution in the way we think about and play games. It's just another rung in the ladder of evolution that will lead to an amalgamated and homogenous videogames experience. Everything that the 360 and Microsoft is offering us is something we've been offered before. It isn't a bad thing per se, but it isn't life or industry changing. So, please, let us be honest: fancier graphics aren't the be-all-end-all today as they were yesterday.

Limitation in technology is now surpassed by limitation in design; games technology is becoming as fully fledged as it ever will be. What we need to grow is not the platform but the content, the semiotics and our narrative delivery that will give future generations and us a fresh experience once in a while. Hollywood never would have survived had it continued to bash out Technicolor musicals. The videogames industry certainly won't if it continues to slog out monster, zombie or alien-led FPS sequels.

So I ask you, **Edge**, please don't lose sight of what is important in this generation more than any other.

Continued



**Topic: Motion Sickness**
**I'd never suffered from motion sickness until recently. It happened a bit on *Halo 2* and then again on Christmas Day whilst playing *Half-Life 2* (and no I hadn't overdone it on the sherry). Before these games I'd played a dozen or so FPSes on various consoles (including *Halo*) and never had a problem. So what causes it? Why does it happen sometimes and not others? Is there anything I can do to stop it (like sitting far from the TV or having my head clamped into an unmoveable position with a vice)?**
JB

**I never really get motion sickness. I do, however, get this freefall feeling whenever my avatar drops from ridiculous heights. *Tomb Raider* was the first game in which I experienced this effect but I also get it when playing *Halo* or *Prince Of Persia: TSOT*.**
hunk

**A lot of people got this when *Half-Life 2* was released. Primarily PC gamers sit very close to the screen so I'm guessing that because they were so engrossed in the 'realism' of the environments (etc) that for a short time the mind gets confused that it's not actually moving the body, or if your sight is diverted from the game after a prolonged time playing it could make you feel woozy because you have to refocus your vision (I guess the screen is flat so you focus at a set distance to the screen even though you're looking in to a three-dimensional space on the screen itself, so when you look away you have to adjust to the fact that you need to focus on distances). If I'm making any sense, it's kinda late.**
redzero

**I get horrible motion sickness in everyday life (have more than once got sick in an elevator), but never when playing games, so I have absolutely no constructive input to this thread. Sorry.**
ChopperByrne

Innovation and passion will garner more respect from gamers than silicon will from the staff of your car magazines. You are in a very privileged position. Please don't blow it all by backing decadence over substance or losing yourselves in Microsoft or Sony's launch party booze.
**Will Luton**

Microsoft's genuine innovation is to make connectivity central to the 360 player's experience. Things like achievement points and Live Arcade have already fundamentally changed what people play, how they play it, and who they are in the first place. Which remains a lot more interesting to us than any amount of booze.

Something that has annoyed me recently about the gaming scene is all this emphasis on online play. The idea is sound, I agree, and playing against or alongside other people may bring a realism to games no AI jiggery pokery will ever replicate, but in reality, these gaming sessions are often ruled by foul-mouthed morons who either cheat or just mess about, killing any fun you ever sought in the first place.

For me, though, this was never a real concern as online play was very much a niche market and something I found easy to avoid. Yet now we are getting big-name games so focused on online play that their singleplayer 'campaigns' have become an afterthought by the developer, often leaving such gamers who have no interest in online play with a dud on their hands. I am talking about the poor, rushed-out campaign in *Halo 2* where the multiplayer is really the only reason not to trade-in said game, and more recently *Perfect Dark Zero*, which I gather has a poor singleplayer game but a better multiplayer game – a sentence I am reading all too frequently these days. If developers keep putting all their effort into the online portion of their title and shortchanging us with a naff singleplayer mode, then I can see me losing interest in the gaming scene altogether.

So wake up, developers – online is not all there is to the gaming scene. It wasn't what got you here and it is not what will keep the gaming scene alive for years to come. A good story and good gameplay will always win over thi gamer any day of the week.
**Craig**

*Halo 2* and *PDZ*? Fair enough. But they hardly represent an epidemic. Let's giv online console gaming more time to evolve before we make a call on this.



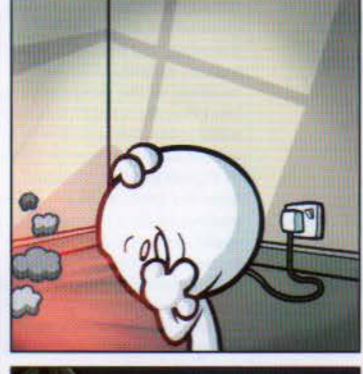
**Topic: Run, jump or roll?**
**Whilst playing *God Of War* my dad asked me why I kept rolling about – the reason was of course that it's quicker than just running. Anyone else found themselves jumping like a mad thing through a platformer to exploit a gameplay loophole?**
Mocl

**It actually tells you in the *Forsaken* manual that flying sideways, up/down and forwards at the same time moves you 70% faster than just flying straight ahead.**
Spacehost

**How about the running whilst crouching and jumping *Counter-Strike* technique? Apparently it works so well that the US Army has started using the technique in real battles.**
Blue Swirl

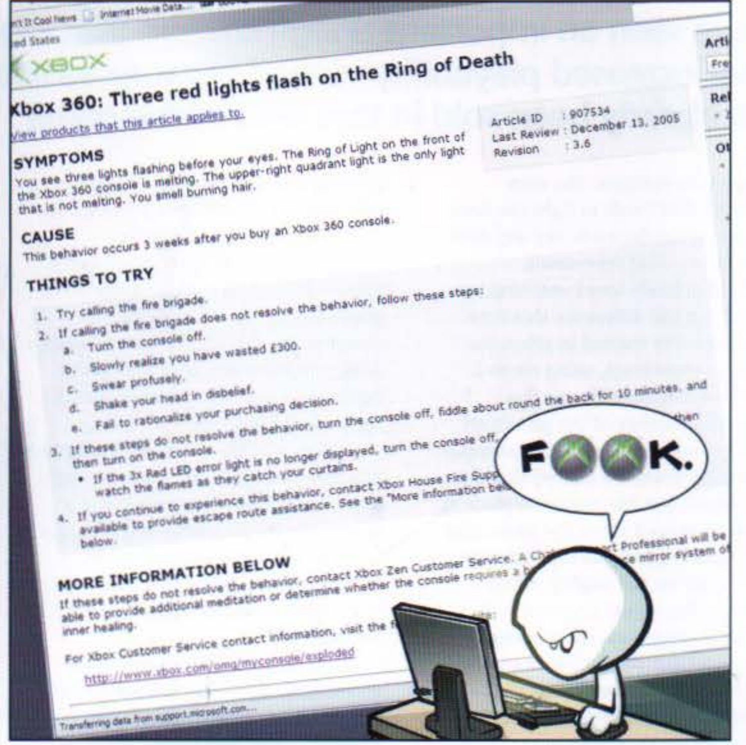
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